The New Criterion

January 1996

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

Notes & Comments, 1
Heidegger & Arendt *by Berel Lang*, 5
Kenneth Tynan: the unshy pornographer *by Joseph Epstein*, 10
Céline at Sigmaringen *by Jim Tuck*, 20
F. R. Leavis: the last critic? *by Paul Dean*, 28
"Mighty poets" *by Donald Hall*, 39

Theater: "Holiday" & other plays *by Mark Steyn*, 43; **Art:** Howard Hodgkin *by Mario Naves*, 49; **The media:** Groupthink television *by James Bowman*, 52
Books: *John Updike* In the beauty of the lilies *reviewed by Brooke Allen*, 57; *John Goodman, translator* Diderot on art *reviewed by Karen Wilkin*, 60; *James Kraft, editor* The selected Witter Bynner & a new life of the poet *reviewed by David Yezzi*, 65; *Vera Brodsky Lawrence* Strong on music: the New York music scene in the days of George Templeton Strong *reviewed by James F. Penrose*, 69; *Andrew Delbanco* The death of Satan: how Americans have lost the sense of evil *reviewed by James W. Tuttleton*, 74; **Letters**, 80

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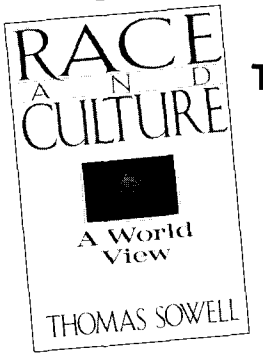

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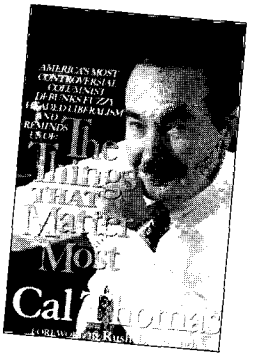

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Notes & Comments: January 1996

Georgetown flunks English

It is said that in the depth of the Dark Ages, after the various barbarian hordes had done their best to destroy classical culture, it was the Roman Catholic Church that—here and there in lonely, out-of-the-way monasteries—kept the fragile flame of learning alive. Decade after decade, century after century, anonymous monks busied themselves transcribing and preserving sundry fragments of an endangered tradition, *ad maiorem dei gloriam*. Of course, it was not until the Renaissance that the rediscovery and embrace of our classical inheritance really burgeoned. But we all owe the Church an enormous debt of gratitude for preserving the rudiments of literacy at a time when intelligence and culture were everywhere besieged.

What happened? The Church itself may still be a force for tradition and literacy, but certain prominent elements within its fold seem to have apostatized, at least on the matter of culture. We are thinking in particular of the recent news that Georgetown University, a well-respected Jesuit college in Washington, D.C., has decided to join the multicultural bandwagon by undermining the integrity of its program in English. A headline in *The Washington Times*, which first reported the story, summed it up: "Classical Authors Dropped: Georgetown Changes English Curriculum."

The upshot of the change is that, beginning with the class of 1999, English majors at Georgetown will be able to graduate with a degree in English without ever having read Chaucer, Shakespeare, or Milton. We can only speculate about what other authors they will be able to avoid reading: if we are to downgrade Shakespeare then why not Donne? Why not Johnson, Pope, Swift, Keats, Shelley, Byron, Wordsworth, Tennyson, Browning? Henceforth, students ostensibly studying English at Georgetown will be allowed to indulge in "Studies in Culture and Performance," an area of study that, according to an English-department document, will "focus on the power exerted on our lives by such cultural and performative categories as race, gender, sexuality, and nationality."

Ah, yes: "Race, gender, sexuality . . ." It's become a veritable mantra in those academic precincts where legitimate scholarly and pedagogical activities have come under ideological attack. So: instead of reading *The Canterbury Tales*, students at Georgetown will be able to batten on something called "History/Theories of Sexuality." Forget about *Hamlet*: "Women, Revolution, and Media" is much more exciting. And

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who in this Jesuit institution needs to expend energy studying *Paradise Lost* when it is so much easier to sit through "Unspeakable Lives: Gay/Lesbian Narratives"?

One of the most outrageous aspects of this development at Georgetown has been the response of the faculty who favor the change. Their basic argument—it is one frequently encountered from academics attempting to mollify parents, trustees, and other critics—is that the adulteration of the English major is nothing to worry about. Professor Jim Slevin, chairman of the English department at Georgetown, has apparently done yeoman's service attempting to conciliate the various factions in his department. But his bleating about attempting to be "inclusive" is pusillanimous hogwash when being "inclusive" means granting the current crop of multicultural clichés parity with Shakespeare.

It is an insidious situation. Quoth one professor, "I can reassure you that Shakespeare is in no danger of disappearing from the curriculum." Really? The idea is that since students will still be *allowed* to read Shakespeare, the change in requirements for the major is no big deal. But this is disingenuous, at best. For when academic rigor is sacrificed academic achievement suffers correspondingly. No doubt there will continue to be English majors at Georgetown who will sedulously acquaint themselves with the treasures of English literature; but there will also be many who will opt for multicultural maundering. This may be fashionable in the short run, but the long-term effect will be to diminish the reputation of the Georgetown English department and, likewise, to depreciate the value of a Georgetown degree. We wonder whether students have considered petitioning for a refund of their tuition, since what they are being offered is clearly worth a lot less than what was advertised when they matriculated at Georgetown.

There is also an important subsidiary evil. In places where courses like "History/Theories of Sexuality" or "Women, Revolution, and Media" are championed, canonical authors, when they are taught at all, are often reduced to pawns in some contemporary ideological campaign. Thus Shakespeare is studied not as a great playwright but as a coefficient of early British colonialism (*viz The Tempest*), while Milton is examined in the light of his deplorable misogyny. (Imagine: "He for God only, she for God in him.")

We recognize that the situation at Georgetown is far from novel. Many, many institutions of higher learning (higher than what?) have abandoned all manner of traditional academic requirements in order to join the P.C. diversity brigades. Syracuse University was one of the first to jettison the requirement that students of English actually study the classics of English literature. That was several years ago. In the meantime, campus after campus has capitulated to the contemporary Visigoths and Vandals who are out to sack the curriculum and push the study of the humanities into a new multicultural twilight. What makes the case of Georgetown so disappointing is the fact that the college is run by a teaching order that has traditionally, often in the face of great adversity, upheld the highest intellectual and pedagogical standards. The Jesuit motto is *ad maiorem dei gloriam*: "to the greater glory of God." Alas, that may now have to be emended to read: *ad maiorem ignorantiae gloriam.*

There is, however small, a silver-lining department in this story, and that concerns the students at Georgetown. According to reports in *The Washington Times* and *The Washington Post*, the prime instigators for this latest assault on higher learning came not from students but from the faculty. This, in fact, has become a typical pattern at many colleges and universities. Often, the

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main impetus for embracing the radical, multicultural agenda comes from an entrenched faculty and administration that, weaned on the liberationist nostrums of the 1960s, have never outgrown their adolescent yearnings. The students, on the contrary—or many of them, anyway—are repelled and angered by the spectacle of their teachers' derilection. To be sure, one student at Georgetown was quoted complaining that the traditional English major was "very limiting" and extolling the new plan for its "multicultural approach." But many other students were outraged, rightly, that such radical decisions affecting their education and the value of their degrees were taken without consulting them. As one senior English major put it, "The mere possibility that one could graduate from Georgetown with a major in English never having experienced Shakespeare, Chaucer or Milton is disgraceful." We couldn't agree more.

Mainstreaming deviancy

Over the last few years, we have more than once had occasion to cite Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan's brilliant 1993 article from *The American Scholar* called "Defining Deviancy Down." In that essay, Senator Moynihan outlined some of the manifold ways in which our society has attempted to deny deviancy by redefining it as normal or even, in some instances, as glamorous. In case after case, he showed, behavior that would have been considered unacceptable even a few years ago is excused or championed today as normal. The result has been a blunting of our sensibilties and an increasing impotence in the face of social breakdown. Inured to the outrageous, we often can barely recognize deviance as such, much less take effective action against it.

In "Defining Deviancy Down," Senator Moynihan was concerned primarily with such glaring urban pathologies as illegitimacy, drug abuse, unemployment, and violence. But his diagnosis is equally applicable to the realms of culture and morality. There, too, over the last few decades we have witnessed concerted efforts to deny deviancy by redefining it. As a result, basic standards of propriety, taste, and accomplishment have been eroded—where, indeed, they have not collapsed altogether. Much that would formerly have been rejected as repulsive trash is now not only countenanced but also celebrated.

Readers seeking corroboration of this assertion will find particularly egregious examples in *The New York Times Magazine* for December 17. Among other offerings in that issue was a fawning article about the writer Dorothy Allison, coyly self-described as a "cross-eyed, working-class lesbian addicted to violence, language and hope," and—under the title "Zine Dreams"—a peppy encomium about the way underground magazines, "occasionally obscene and invariably idiosyncratic," have attracted the mainstream attention of "Hollywood, record companies, even Barnes & Noble."

Note well: these articles are instances of advocacy, not reporting. The brutal, pornographic writings of Miss Allison and the trashy, postmodernist ravings of such organs as *Dirty*, *Crap Hound*, and *Boiled Angel* are held up not for scrutiny but for admiration. Miss Allison—whom the *Times* refers to as "the Roseanne of Literature," a reference to the vulgar television comedienne—has recently gone from being an obscure fringe figure to celebrity on the basis of *Bastard Out of Carolina*, a semi-autobiographical novel that was a finalist for the National Book Award and is now being made into a movie. According to the *Times*, Miss Allison appeals to a "broad spectrum," "from readers of Southern fiction to incest survivors and lesbian sex radicals." How broad can you get? As Andy Warhol might

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have put it, all the way from A to B and back again.

Written by Alexis Jetter, the article about Dorothy Allison is cast in the smarmy, P.C. victim-speak that the *Times* now favors for all its approved subjects. Accordingly, Miss Allison exudes an "aura of raw pain." She was born illegitimately to a fifteen-year-old "in a culture where women were old at 25 and men never grow up at all." Legally blind in one eye, "she can't even step off a sidewalk with much confidence." Amazingly, though, "she's a mean shot with a rifle." Having been sexually abused by her stepfather as a child—and having sent her little sisters into him "because I knew he wasn't as bad with them as he was with me"—Miss Allison "wakes up in the middle of the night, plagued by survivor guilt." She writes now "to save herself." Nevertheless, she refuses "to write morality plays."

Indeed. Miss Allison's book *Trash* is described as a collection of "angry short stories" that deal "forthrightly with the scars of incest and the joys of raunchy sex between women." Although "she can't always tell where the truth ends and the story begins," Miss Allison is emerging as a kind of moral beacon for like-minded souls. She takes pride in her "white trash" background. Her editor describes her as "the Lourdes of writers"—"people come to her to be healed"—and "critics" are said by Miss Jetter to have compared her to "William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor and Harper Lee." (Well, a character *in* works by Faulkner or Flannery O'Connor, perhaps.) Miss Jetter ends her gushing portrait with a cozy domestic moment. Although not "easily lulled by happiness," these days "a certain contentedness" has seeped into the Allison *ménage*, which consists of Miss Allison, her partner, and her partner's biological son, a three-year-old named Wolf. No one reading this article will have any doubts that Miss Allison will succeed in being "a model of outrageousness" for this little boy, whom she describes fondly as a "turkey-baster-bastard." Whether he will also grow up to enjoy life, as she hopes, is, alas, a more difficult question.

The *Times* mustered similar enthusiasm for the new, mainstream popularity of formerly underground magazines: low-budget, generally smudgy paeans to quirkiness, fetishism, and cultural fragmentation. It says a lot, we think, that the editors at the *Times Magazine* considered the cover of one of the "zines" under discussion "a little too racy" to be pictured. We learn that the owner of *Beer Frame* is "bursting to sell out" while *Dirty* maintains its integrity by never using "computer graphics programs . . . to enhance [images of] critical male body parts." *Crap Hound*, a compendium of kitchen gadgets and sex toys, comes in for substantial praise, as does *Boiled Angel*, which publishes "the kind of Americana that only a pedophile could love: homey portraits of childhood abuse rendered in words and crude cartoon images. Crack-addicted mothers. Sodomizing fathers. Children who 'tickle' their siblings with broken beer bottles." Supporters of this last gem, we are told, include the creator of "Beavis and Butt-head" and Andres Serrano, he of the crucifix-dipped-in-urine fame. Impressive recommendations, these!

It is hardly a secret that *The New York Times Magazine* long ago ceased being an organ with any claim to journalistic distinction or intellectual integrity. Increasingly little more than a slick vehicle for advertising from the fashion industry, it has in recent years become ever more shallow and trendy. But articles like those praising Dorothy Allison and "zines" like *Crap Hound* and *Boiled Angel* demonstrate that the *Times* is not merely reflecting the deviancy of our age: it is helping to sustain and nurture it as well.

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Snowblind: Martin Heidegger & Hannah Arendt

by Berel Lang

Starting with his own several memoirs, Martin Heidegger's biography has been inscribed in a large number of unreliable texts—fitting, it has been suggested, for his objections to the more stable traditional conception of truth. Elżbieta Ettinger now adds to these accounts her elusive rehearsal of the affair between Heidegger and Hannah Arendt—a relationship generally known as *having* occurred but with its features heavily veiled, and now, even with the correspondence between the two that Ettinger brings to light, not much clearer in detail or less perplexing in character.[1]

The ingredients for high drama in that relationship are unmistakable: passion, intellect, and a half-century of unusual historical crisis. Heidegger and Arendt would die only months apart (1975–76), but it is the beginning of the relationship that has been more difficult to get at, and it's from there that Ettinger's account sets out. The renowned thinkers-to-be first met, in the fall of 1924, at the University of Marburg: Heidegger the rising star of German philosophy, only a few years from succeeding to Edmund Husserl's chair at the University of Freiburg (thirty-five, married, two children, philosophy having displaced his earlier studies for the priesthood); Arendt a first-year student (eighteen, Jewish, unmarried). At the time, the likelihood of anyone's challenging an affair between professor and student was remote, as the distance conventionally honored between the two ranks was great—although the distance in this case seems to have been quickly bridged, spurred on by Heidegger's opening letter to "Miss Arendt," in which he asks only, Ettinger reports, "that she let him help her to remain faithful to herself."

Arendt evidently "let him" (she "did not need coaxing," Ettinger claims to know)—and Ettinger places the "beginning of physical intimacy" at the end of February 1925. How much or little of the banality of Heidegger's line Arendt recognized or believed, then or later, even after she herself turned banality into a distinct moral category, remains something of a puzzle. She would subsequently describe Heidegger, in letters that Ettinger cites, as "ly[ing] notoriously always and everywhere, and whenever he can" (1950); "He certainly believed that . . . he could buy off the whole world at the lowest possible price and cheat his way out of everything that is embarrassing to him" (1949). But her devotion to Heidegger withstood this awareness, as it had already and would continue to withstand humiliation after humiliation. The times and places of their meetings—at one point, even of their correspondence—would be set by him not only in Arendt's student days but also after the seventeen-year interruption of communication between them that began in 1933. With the renewal of their relationship,

1 *Hanna Arendt/Martin Heidegger* by Elżbieta Ettinger; Yale University Press, 139 pages, $16.

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Heidegger's wife, Elfride, learned from him of the earlier affair, and Heidegger was not above using *her* as a combination of excuse, buffer, and bludgeon to underscore Arendt's awkward position as the present "friend" replacing the erstwhile "other woman."

Arendt's commitment to Heidegger, as it overrode her recognition of his character—he had *no* character, she once concluded—was so deep and constant that even love's blindness hardly explains it. It persisted through her own two marriages, at least the second of which (to Heinrich Bluecher) involved great depth and feeling; it persisted through separation and silence and rebuff. It even survived the "gofer" role she accepted throughout their relationship (Heidegger asked *her* to take charge of selling the manuscript of *Sein und Zeit*). Arendt's willingness to subordinate herself to Heidegger did not seem to diminish as her own success and prominence increased, matched step for step by his resentment. (Her reaction to this? "I am quite ready to behave toward Heidegger as though I have never written a word and will never write one" [1955].)

And of course, hovering over the whole of the fifty-year span was the specter of Nazism. One looks in vain for the shadow it might have cast on either or both of the couple. Heidegger, a Nazi Party member from 1933 to the war's end, was willing to use his bully-pulpit as rector of Freiburg to announce, in November 1933, that "the Führer and he alone is the present and future German reality and law"; later, after the Third Reich's demise, he would pass thirty prolific years without a public word condemning its murderous regime or, more to the immediate instance of his lover, its implementing the "Final Solution." Arendt, who also in 1933 left Germany for exile in France, saw from the inside the internment camp at Gurs, and, upon reaching the U.S. in 1941, embarked on the searching account of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. She was employed almost throughout the twelve years of Nazi power by various Jewish organizations dealing with the effects of that power, including the collateral move of Zionism toward establishing a Jewish state.

Admittedly, history is written and read with greater clarity than it is lived. Thus, the specter of Nazism might have been dim in 1924 for the young student from a household in enlightened Königsberg which was so at ease with its surroundings that "the word 'Jew' was never mentioned." But the specter was more distinct by 1928, when, Ettinger declares, the affair between Heidegger and Arendt (or, more accurately, this phase of the affair) ended; when, not coincidentally, Heidegger learned of his appointment to the professorship at Freiburg and—coincidentally or not—turned to another woman, Elizabeth Blochmann. (Well before that terminus, Heidegger had begun to encourage Arendt to leave Marburg, suggesting to her, in Ettinger's paraphrase, that "she had failed to establish herself and did not fit in"—a "Dear Joan" letter which shows great finesse.) By 1928, the Nazis had built up, in rhetoric and membership, a noticeable head of steam, including some early soundings of *völkisch* themes by Heidegger himself. Five years later, although the "Final Solution" was yet to be formulated in detail, the ground for it was being laid, together with the will required to implement it. Three months after Hitler became chancellor at the end of January 1933, and with the exclusion of Jewish students and faculty from the universities well under way, Heidegger latched onto the rectorship (soon to be designated the Führership) of the University of Freiburg; Arendt, a bit later that same year and after receiving a last response from Heidegger in which he angrily assured her of how much he was doing for the Jews at his university, crossed the border of exile. No word would then be exchanged between the lovers for the next seventeen years.

It was during that period, 1933–1950, that the "Final Solution" was indeed posed as an answer to the "Jewish Question"—a fact of which both Heidegger and Arendt were

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well aware when they resumed their relationship. They were both also aware that Heidegger himself stood accused of complicity in advancing the cause of Nazism in the academy, and that, because of his activities, he had been banned from the university of which he earlier was rector (the ban lasted four years, until 1950). What effect did such events, and the other larger-scale ones that occurred during this interval (or the interval itself), have on the relationship between Heidegger and Arendt? Leaving aside the "physical intimacy" that Ettinger does not refer to after its first moment, virtually none. In 1950 Heidegger needed all of the few friends he could muster; and Arendt, presumably for the same reasons that moved her earlier, was again willing to come forward. She strained to translate the reservations she had into faults on the part of those who incited criticism of Heidegger, into a "pathology" or "professional deformation" afflicting Heidegger (as it were, beyond his control), into the baneful influence of Elfride, whose anti-Semitism indisputably antedated her awareness of the Arendt affair and who was decidedly *not* willing (as Martin was) to plead that "some of my best friends (or at least students) are Jews."

There seems in fact to have been only one juncture at which Arendt's misgivings about Heidegger seriously threatened her commitment; this was in reaction to her discovery of the letter Heidegger had sent to the retired Husserl forbidding him access to the university. At first, Arendt believed Heidegger had sent the letter personally. When Karl Jaspers pointed out to her that this was not a personal but a circular letter sent to all (former) Jewish faculty, she persisted and, in reference to Husserl's subsequent illness and death, referred to Heidegger as a "potential murderer." Strong words, but evidently not strong enough to override the commitment.

It is difficult to identify love from the inside, let alone from the outside—but if ever judgment can be made from appearances, there seems no doubt about, and almost no limits on, Arendt's love for Heidegger. By the same standards, there is little doubt about the hedges and trimming in Heidegger's relation to her—unless, perhaps, the one who "offers the cheek" has some hidden or unknown means of catching up with the other who "kisses." Arendt herself continued to believe even in her later years that nobody had meant as much to Heidegger as she had, but Ettinger's evidence suggests that Arendt was probably not the best or even a good judge of this. Admittedly, neither the imbalance nor the misconception cited here is less common—or more puzzling—than its millions of occurrences elsewhere. But not many of those others represent history's encounter with personal idea and feeling as this relationship did, and so its perplexing character emerges here with special force.

I have cited Ettinger's account as an addition to the numerous unreliable texts of the Heidegger history. (Arendt's history, however complex and contentious, has not been similarly affected.) This criticism is not directed at Ettinger's failure to "solve" the Heidegger-question or to explain Arendt's postwar reconciliation with Heidegger or to show what consequences their relationship had, early or late, on their respective thinking. Ettinger could have said more than she does about these, but her purpose was more narrowly to bring to light the newly disclosed material from their correspondence. Nor, unlike much writing about Heidegger, is her book tendentious in charting his biography aside from his relationship with Arendt (the question of the connection between his life and his thinking she leaves untouched). If Ettinger has any ideological ax to grind, it is a mildly feminist one which shows Arendt as a victim—a conclusion Ettinger only in part joins to the other evidence she presents of Arendt as collaborator in that victimization.

Two errant aspects of Ettinger's design undermine her account, however. First, she sometimes purports to know more than she has given evidence for (or, in a few

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instances, *could* find evidence for); and second, she seems carelessly indifferent in her scholarly method. So, as an instance of the former, Ettinger asks and then replies to the question of what it was that drew Arendt to Heidegger: "What truly mattered to her was not erotic attraction, which may or may not have existed—she was sensual without being strongly sexual—but the special role that she believed she played in his life." How much, the question might here be posed, would one person have to know about another in order to substantiate this nest of claims? At any rate, if Ettinger indeed knows that much about Arendt, she does not let her reader in on it—any more than she does in describing Heidegger at the beginning of the affair: "Strict, rigid, hard-working, the son of devout Catholic peasants—[he] seems to have [previously] known little of genuine passion, of a physical and spiritual bond." Perhaps, as Ettinger contends, Heidegger's relationship with Arendt changed all this in his life. But it is not obvious that the qualities thus ascribed to Heidegger do exclude one another *or* that Heidegger had waited for Arendt before the displacement Ettinger claims to have occurred. Just when and how Heidegger's reputation as a womanizer arose is a question that Ettinger does not even broach, although after the first step of choosing her book's subject, it is hard to see why discretion or delicacy should hinder that smaller one.

Does any of this matter, other than as prurience on the part of readers who look for more between than in the lines of a text? Perhaps not for the larger interests of history, and perhaps not for the interests of metaphysics either. But surely it matters for a book in which the relationship, and whatever turns on it, is the thing. The ideal of history as a seamless web, after all, was never intended to exclude the seamy. (Or should editors now find a place for an "omission mark" alongside the question mark and the exclamation point—perhaps with the Latin notation *infra dig*?)

What Ettinger glides over here in her leaps of inference also reflects the second problem referred to: her indifference to the dull but rudimentary questions of scholarship about the sources of her account. That Heidegger and Arendt had an affair which began at Marburg has been generally known, as has the fact that their relationship revived in some form after World War II. What has produced varieties of speculation are the questions of how the relationship evolved, what its importance was for them (early and late), and the way in which it did or did not reflect or impinge on their thinking. One large obstacle in the way of answering such questions has been the restrictions placed around the Heidegger–Arendt correspondence and around the Heidegger archives generally. The latter are held under severe restraints by Heidegger's literary executors in the Deutsches Literaturachiv at Marbach (access is permitted, as the rules have been explained to me, only to those manuscripts that have been published, which in turn depends on the executors' permission). The bulk of the Arendt papers are partly at Marbach, partly in the Library of Congress; these include, at Marbach, about a hundred letters to Arendt by Heidegger (1925–75) and about thirty letters from Arendt to Heidegger (1928–75). (Ettinger notes that Arendt made copies of all the post-1950 letters she sent to Heidegger and some of the earlier ones. Is it these [pre-Xerox] copies that Ettinger is working from? Were the letters of which Arendt made copies indeed received by Heidegger? Were the letters sent/received identical to the copies now held? etc., etc.)

I understand that there are, in the Heidegger archives, seventeen letters from Arendt to Heidegger which remain out of public reach. Ettinger does not explicitly identify these or anything else in the Heidegger holdings that might bear on the relationship—although, according to a recent account in *The New York Times Book Review*, Ettinger was allowed by the Heidegger executors to read the letters in that holding. But she does not mention, let alone

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elaborate on, these complexities; nor does she, in citing the letters from the Arendt collection, say anything about the extent of the holdings, what letters she did or did not make use of, what restrictions she accepted even in relation to the Arendt collection, and what significance the answers to these questions could have for the story she tells. I mention the matter of restrictions since Ettinger herself hints at them, although again without explanation: she acknowledges the permission of the Hannah Arendt Literary Trust to "use" Arendt's own letters to Heidegger and his wife (are these the copies Arendt made? Or are they the originals?); and then acknowledges the permission of the Trust to "peruse" Heidegger's letters to Arendt (these are presumably the real thing). The difference between "use" and "peruse" is obviously fraught, but exactly what it amounts to, like everything else in the background of the "novelties" in this volume, is left for the reader to find out. (He will not be helped by the lack of an index in the book.) Perhaps nothing yet to be found or brought to the public eye in any of the now sequestered archival material would substantially change the outline of the relationship between Heidegger and Arendt that begins to emerge in Ettinger's account. But at this point neither her readers nor perhaps Ettinger herself knows this—and the likelihood is that at least some of the answers to such questions would make a difference.

There has been ample evidence that among their other abilities, both Heidegger and Arendt knew how to wait; it has already been evident that the story of their relationship could teach something about waiting to currently impatient scholarship. Even allowing for that, however, it is remarkable that in a book intended to recover history, elementary questions of method should be so slighted that the result not only delays but hinders. But so it is: a flight of extraordinary intellect and undoubted passion stumbles over an only too visible—historical—obtrusion. Or is this itself also a portrait of the two lives?

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Kenneth Tynan: the unshy pornographer

by Joseph Epstein

Be an empiricist
In socialism and sex!
Read Wilhelm Reich
And remember the Czechs!
—Kenneth Tynan, *in a birthday poem to his daughter Tracy*

In a letter written to the agent Irving "Swifty" Lazar proposing an autobiography strong on name-dropping—a "conglamouration of stars," as John Gielgud once put it in a slip of the tongue while acting in a Congreve play—Kenneth Tynan described himself as a talent snob. Quite accurate, too. Right out of the gate the young Kenneth Tynan was a fan—fanatically worshipful of athletes, of musicians, and above all of actors—and fanatical worship easily elides into snobbery.

Later, Tynan was snobbishly pleased at his connections with the talented and greatly acclaimed. ("Last year," he wrote to friends in 1980, "met Cary Grant. Top that.") "In our teens," Tynan wrote at forty in a profile of Duke Ellington, "we make hero-lists of those we worship and intend one day to meet. Mine when I was thirteen included a cricketer, a stripper, a painter, a drama critic, several actors, a film director, and a jazz musician. I crossed them off as I met them, either socially or professionally, but until recently only one name remained unblotted." This was of course Ellington's. Cross another name off.

Arranging his life around his enthusiasms, Tynan became a drama critic—the drama critic of his age, in fact—thus finding a way to obtain a good seat for every show in town and entrée to friendship with nearly every interesting figure of his day connected with the stage or movies. Whom Ken Tynan didn't know wasn't worth knowing. Michelangelo Antonioni claimed that he got the idea for his movie *Blow-Up*, about swinging (read: decadent) London, from a party he attended in the middle 1960s at Tynan's Mount Street apartment.

Every critic, no matter what his subject, is, one supposes, something of a talent snob. What is the point of criticism beyond that of making those distinctions—between the unacceptable and the acceptable, and between the better and the best—that are at the heart of all acts of criticism and snobbery alike? I discriminate, the unspoken credo of the critic in the arts runs, therefore I am. For Kenneth Tynan discrimination was never a problem. Authority in discrimination, that mysterious yet central element in the make-up of the good critic, came to him early, really quite startlingly early. Tynan looked for magic in theatrical performance—for, as he once described his own theater-going in the 1940s and 1950s, the chance "of seeing outsize personalities operating at full blast." Full blast—in and for the moment—was also the way he wished to live his own life, and for the most part he did.

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As a theater critic, Tynan provided his own kind of magic. Simon Callow, the actor and biographer of theatrical personages, in a preface to a collection of Tynan's magazine profiles, wrote that the theme of Tynan's profiles "is always Life as Performance, embodied in prose which is Writing as Performance." *Brilliant* was the word most regularly applied to Tynan's drama criticism. A Tynan review was smart, penetrating, persuasive, entertaining. One wanted to read it almost as much as one might want to see the play under review, and it may not be going too far to say that frequently it was a good bit better than that play.

As is well enough known, musicians show early brilliance, so do mathematicians, so sometimes do actors and (even though less often) poets, but critics almost never. Or if they do it tends to be brilliance of a flashy kind unlikely to endure. Critical intelligence takes time to develop: for learning to be acquired, judgment to form, perspective to broaden. Kenneth Tynan is a glittering exception. He seemed to come into the world with vast reserves of theatrical knowledge. The theater was in his bones, his flesh quivered at any hint of theatrical excitement, his mind was handsomely stocked and ready for any critical contingency.

Tynan was a man marked for success. He was in that line of extremely clever young men come down from Oxbridge and straightaway given important jobs, it being understood that they need not make the vulgar climb implied in starting at the bottom. A partial roster of their names includes J. C. Squires, Desmond MacCarthy, and Cyril Connolly. "We are both admirably successful failures," Squires said to MacCarthy toward the close of their careers. Connolly, too, made a nice success out of failure. But Kenneth Tynan—"Ken" to Katharine Hepburn and Orson Welles and Johnny Carson and many another name of not lesser magnitude—had larger things in mind.

At the end of his short life—he died at the age of fifty-three—Tynan must have known he had blown it, and though failure may from a certain jaded point of view seem more elegant than success, it could never have seemed so to Kenneth Tynan, who worshiped success. "I see no point in an avant-garde which has no ambitions beyond a tiny minority," he once said. And of him his wife, the late Kathleen Tynan, who was also his biographer, wrote: "He believed in joining the Establishment to change it from within." A statement that may be decoded to mean that he, Tynan, wanted everything and he wanted it every which way.

Kenneth Tynan was raised in one of those extraordinarily complicated domestic arrangements in which the English seemed for a time to specialize. He was illegitimate. His father, a successful merchant whose name was Peter Peacock, kept up businesses and lives in both Birmingham and Warrington. One is reminded here of J. R. Ackerley's father, who kept up two households in two different parts of London, each unknown to the other. (The sun never sets on British polygamy.) In Tynan's case, it was only he, the son, who didn't know that his father, whose name he thought was Peter Tynan, was actually Sir Peter Peacock, and he only discovered it at his father's death, when he, Ken, was twenty-one. Only then, too, did he learn that he had five half-brothers and sisters, whom he never met nor, after this discovery, ever attempted to meet.

As a boy, Tynan collected autographs, came early to confidence in his own views, and was indulged by his mother and usually given way to by his father. His father wanted Ken to go to Rugby, for example, but his mother thought it a bad idea, for outside Birmingham he might have discovered the scandalous circumstances of his birth. The chief influences in his life came from outside his home: from movies, from magazines, from friends. A cousin once said of Kenneth Tynan that he went about as a young man like the peacock he didn't know he was. He wore flamboyant clothes and carried strong opinions. At the age of ten,

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in 1938, he wrote a letter to the editor of *Film Weekly* staking out the claim that Humphrey Bogart was a great actor. He was a great show-off. "He had to take your breath away, he just couldn't resist it," a school friend later noted, adding: "And it went right through his life."

By the time he went off to Oxford at eighteen, Tynan had read *Ulysses*, taken his personal philosophy from D. H. Lawrence —including the notion that "sex is the supreme mystical emotion"—and worshiped Orson Welles. He worried about whether "I am really a repulsive character—whether my pose is exorcising the real Me." He had begun to sign off his letters, in imitation of Sarah Bernhardt, *Quand même*, "in spite of everything."

He went to Oxford on a scholarship, and his success there was predictable in everything but its magnitude. Between the institution and the boy, it was love at first sight. "God," he wrote to a Birmingham friend, "how magnificent and mellow it all is; the very stones seem lambent." Twenty years further on, he would write of his Oxford days: "Nothing can ever top the sense of privileged exhilaration I felt then." And so it must have been.

Tynan's talent was as ubiquitous as his position as, in the words of a classmate, "a licensed shocker." Paul Johnson, who was at Oxford at the same time, remembers Tynan "fighting a little lone war all on his own, to bring glamour back to Oxford." He became the drama critic of *Isis*, the leading student magazine. He directed and acted in plays. He specialized in going too far. He dressed quite as extravagantly outside the theater as on its stage, going about in bottle-green or purple suits, gold satin shirts worn with gold velvet bow ties, cloaks with red linings, and green suede shoes. He smoked Russian cigarettes through a black-and-white cigarette holder. He sometimes wore make-up. He was doing an Oscar Wilde. In her biography of Tynan, his wife remarks that he "even encouraged the rumour that he was homosexual," which makes for a historically interesting first: someone trying to pass not as hetero- but homosexual.

Tynan early had the ability of impressing whomever he felt required it. C. S. Lewis, his tutor at Oxford, whom in a schoolboy letter he described as "terribly sound and sunny," said of his, Tynan's, early essays that if Lamb and Gibbon had been the same person, they would when young have produced student essays like Tynan's. Lewis taught him much about prose style. He won academic prizes for essays on Milton and Shakespeare. Not yet twenty, he had no hesitation about writing on Orson Welles or Arthur Koestler or a Laurence Olivier performance of *King Lear* or the American theater in an *ex cathedra* manner. As an undergraduate, he wrote for *Vogue*. "Oxford gave me a superiority complex," he would later aver. "I think it ruined me."

Charm, he knew, was his trump card. "I would rather write amusingly and inaccurately than correctly and tediously," he wrote to a friend. To the same friend he wrote, after meeting Stephen Spender, "He reminded me of the title of Mr. Sinatra's latest song: 'My Nancy with the Laughing Face,'" and described a waitress "with a strong resemblance to Virginia Woolf (or a depressed turkey)." He had no compunction about approaching the celebrated. Even before going up to Oxford, he arranged to meet James Agate, the leading drama critic of the day, who made a pass at him. As an undergraduate, he wrote confidently to John Gielgud. Later, when his daughter was about to be born, he asked Katharine Hepburn, whom he had just met, to be the child's godmother. Great celebrity seems never to have daunted him. And why should it, for he planned on acquiring it himself.

Tynan took a second-class honors degree in English, which disappointed him, but which didn't really matter, for he had otherwise sufficiently established his brilliance. He was clearly a man in a hurry, someone on a schedule, as all the passionately ambitious are. Not long before he left Oxford,

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he declared that he wished to direct plays, and noted that Peter Brook, at twenty-three, was already far ahead of him in this line. He also thought he might achieve a career as an actor. He planned a collection of his theater pieces, which he actually did bring out (*He That Plays the King*, 1950) when he was only twenty-four. Still, he had premonitions of an early death, encouraged somewhat by the discovery of weakness in his lungs. He allowed to his first of four different fiancées that the word *waste* troubled him more than any other.

Writing to an actress in 1951, Kenneth Tynan remarked that "a lot of stories become more effective if the audience knows the ending, and becomes absorbed by *how* things happen, rather than by *what* things happen." In good part, Tynan himself predicted the course his own life would take. Not yet twenty-one, writing to one of his fiancées—Tynan's chief method of seduction as a young man seems to have been to propose marriage—he noted: "My attempt to live *in the moment*, looking neither forwards nor backwards, has led me to absorb myself completely in the things going on immediately about me. I feel more poignantly the implications of circumstances because I have made it my credo to do so." Even earlier, in 1945, at eighteen, in boyish lower-case lettering, he noted: "i have never written a book. i have begun many, and finished none. i write quickly, but polish slowly. i shall never write a sustained novel or critical essay; my critical works will bulk small but precious." And that is pretty much how Kenneth Tynan lived his life: for the moment, in journalism, leaving a small body of work behind.

Freshly down from Oxford, the most famous undergraduate of his day—"The Golden Age is finished, gone the grace/ Who now so fit to fill Ken Tynan's place," ran a poem in *Isis* upon his departure—journalism welcomed him. He began writing drama criticism for *The Spectator*, went from there to the *Evening Standard*, the *Daily Sketch*, the *Observer*, and, beginning in 1958 until his death in 1980, off and on for *The New Yorker*. (In 1965, he turned down an offer by *The New York Times* to become its drama critic.) As he remarked in the preface to *Curtains* (1961), a collection of his theater pieces: "Long before I became an undergraduate I enjoyed setting down my impressions of plays in performance; it seemed to me unfair that an art so potent should also be so transient, and I was deeply seduced by the challenge of perpetuating it in print." He puts the same point slightly differently fourteen years later, in his introduction to *A View of the English Stage* (1975), where, after noting that the theater he knew as a boy and young man belonged to the actors, he writes: "What turned me into a critic was the urge to commemorate these astonishing men and women, whose work would otherwise die with the memories of those who saw it."

When Kenneth Tynan came on the scene as a drama critic, the English theater was perhaps as rich in actors as it would ever be in its history. How they did please their audiences, let us count the names: John Gielgud, Ralph Richardson, Edith Evans, Margaret Leighton, Paul Scofield, Margaret Rutherford, Michael Redgrave, Anthony Quayle, Cyril Ritchard, Charles Laughton, Joan Plowright, Agnes Moorhead, Alec Guinness, Donald Wolfit, Maurice Evans, Peggy Ashcroft, Rex Harrison, and (the younger generation now) Peter O'Toole, Richard Burton, Albert Finney, Nicol Williamson, Alan Bates—and, above all, Laurence Olivier, the actor of actors and easily the actor of the era of great actors, whom Tynan returned to again and again in his criticism, and under whom he served as literary manager of the National Theatre from 1963 until 1973.

The young Kenneth Tynan was, in his drama criticism if not in his life, Henry James's young man on whom nothing was lost. In a theater, his antennae twirled at a furious pace: nothing got by him, he picked up everything, he was a being organized for writing about the theater. "He writes about

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acting and the theater," noted Simon Callow, "as if he were a sports commentator." That is quite good, giving as it does the sense of excitement that Tynan brought to his critical response to stage performance, except that no sports commentator was ever quite so alive to all that was going on before him as Tynan was in a theater or able to report his response so felicitously as he in his reviews.

Young as he was when he set out his ambitions, Tynan quite achieved them, at least those having to do with preserving extraordinary performances upon the stage. Early in his career, he was pre-eminently the enthusiast, the critic as appreciator, and he handed out charming bouquets: "This is the best Hamlet I have seen. . . . I think, in fine, that we can speak of Paul Scofield as 'Scofield' and know whom we mean." Frederick Valk in *The Master Builder* "seemed an Alp." After a Danny Kaye performance, "you are left panting but relaxed, as dogs always seem to be." Of Richard Burton: "at twenty-five he commands repose and can make silence garrulous." And of Peter Brook's staging of *King Lear*: "Writing about this incomparable production, I cannot pretend to the tranquility in which emotion should properly be recollected."

Along with handing out bouquets, Tynan also had a winning manner of allowing the plays under review to issue in *aperçus*, about the theater or about life in general, that convinced one that a great deal more was going on onstage than one might have thought. Reviewing Congreve, whom he calls the "only sophisticated playwright England has ever produced," he adds: "By sophisticated I mean genial without being hearty, witty without being smug, wise without being pompous, and sensual without being lewd." Sometimes he operated on forced cleverness. "If prose styles were women," he writes apropos Orson Welles's adaptation of *Moby-Dick*, "Melville's would be painted by Rubens and cartooned by Blake: it is a shotgun wedding of sensuousness and metaphysics." On a good night, though, his powers of formulation banged the gong resoundingly: "Samuel Beckett's new work, the latest bulletin from the Arctic latitudes of his particular hell, the starkest portrait he has yet drawn of the slow burial that begins with birth, is called *Happy Days*." Shaw's *The Millionairess* "contains hardly any of those somersaulting paradoxes with which, for so long, Shaw concealed from us the more basic gaps in his knowledge of human nature."

Tynan could be most amusing on the attack. He called the imitators of Harold Pinter the "Pinteretti." Of Ionesco, whose politics and aesthetics he disliked, he wrote: "When you've seen all of Ionesco's plays, I felt at the end, you've seen one of them." He referred to Graham Greene's *The Potting Shed* as "not a whodunit but a Goddunit." Dame Beatrice Lillie's title "sits drolly on her head, like a tiara on an emu." In a Jean Giraudoux play, he describes an actress "got up in what I can best describe as a Freudian slip." It was in the form of a theater review of the staging of Faulkner's *Requiem for a Nun* that he wrote his two-for-the-price-of-one parody of Faulkner and Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, which begins:

> Well, folks, reckon that about it. End of another day in the city of Jefferson, Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi. Nothin' much happened. Couple of people got raped, couple more got their teeth kicked in, but way up there those faraway old stars are still doing their old cosmic crisscross, and there ain't a thing we can do about it. It's pretty quiet now. Folk hereabouts get to bed early, those that can still walk. Down behind the morgue a few of the young people are roastin' a nigger over an open fire, but I guess every town has its nightowls, and afore long they'll be tucked up asleep like anybody else. Nothin' stirring down at the big old plantation house—you can't even hear the hummin' of that electrified barbed-wire fence, 'cause last night some drunk ran slap into it and fused the whole works. That's where Mr. Faulkner lives, and he's the fellow that thought this whole place up, kind of like God. Mr. Faulkner knows

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> everybody round these parts like the back of his hand, 'n' most everybody round these parts knows the back of Mr. Faulkner's hand.

Neither an immitigable highbrow nor a Little Englander, Tynan's theatrical tastes were usefully catholic. He had bred-in-the-bone knowledge of Shakespeare, yet also loved British vaudevillians. He took great pleasure in things American—our musical comedy, movies, jazz as well as Jack Benny, Danny Kaye, and other of our comedians—at a time when many English intellectuals were strongly anti-American. "If latter-day English drama is serious in intent, contemporary in theme, and written in rasping prose," he wrote in 1959, "Broadway and Hollywood are part of the reason." He also wrote well about French, German, and Russian theatrical performance. He was always keenly on the search for the new note in drama.

Lively though Tynan's reviews were, filled with enthusiasm, comedy, and sharp observations, his great success in good part came through his thrusting himself on the stage and somehow making himself part of the show. Through his writing, he was able to come across as if he were in a continuous, high-stakes battle—the battle to bring good and serious theater to England. "As a critic," he said, "I had rather be a war correspondent than a necrologist." It turned out that he was more than a war correspondent, for the latter does not create campaigns, plot strategy, regularly fire with the intent to kill at the opposing side. The extent of Tynan's influence on British theater may be argued, but that it was considerable, I think, cannot.

What also cannot be argued is the extent of Kenneth Tynan's personal ambition. Before long it became clear that it was too grand to limit itself to criticism merely. In a brief piece in the *Observer* in 1955 Tynan wrote about the severe French theater critic Paul Leautaud, who ended his days a man living among his cats, and who, when called upon at his Paris apartment, emits "a strangled cry of grief. . . . It is the sound made by a critic at the end of his life." Alone, sour, petulant, such is the fate of the critic. "Logically," adds Tynan, "for his kind, there is no other. You would become a critic? Consider M. Leautaud: and think again."

Such thoughts must have been much on Tynan's mind as he began to expand his own operations. Early in 1956, he was asked to be a script editor at Ealing Studios, the then successful British movie production company. He had planned a book on the subject of genius-watching. At the age of thirty-one, he was invited to write his autobiography by an editor at Jonathan Cape, who wrote to him: "Quite frankly, I cannot think of anyone else of your age in England to whom I would or could make such a suggestion." In 1958, Wolcott Gibbs, *The New Yorker*'s theater critic, died, and William Shawn invited Tynan to replace him, which Tynan agreed to do, though on a part-time basis. (He would keep his *New Yorker* connection for the remainder of his life; and he ended as a writer of profiles for the magazine.) Later, in 1963, he signed on as a regular contributor to *Playboy*, for whom he did interviews and was to write three pieces a year for $7,000, in those days a handsome fee.

Nineteen sixty-three was the year that Tynan ceased to function full-time as a theater critic, for that year he signed on as dramaturg and literary manager of the new National Theatre in England under the artistic direction of Laurence Olivier. In his own drama criticism, he had been plugging away at the idea of a National Theatre for many years. ("There is little wrong with the production [of *Henry V* at the old Vic]," he wrote, "that a National Theatre and a more experienced company could not cure.") When he wrote to Olivier suggesting himself for the job—this not long after attacking Olivier's directorship of the Chichester Theatre Festival—the actor is said to have remarked to Joan Plowright, his wife, "How shall we slaughter the little bastard?" After in fact hiring Tynan, Olivier added, "Anything to get you off that *Observer*."

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Tynan took the job at well under his salary as a theater critic, and clearly put a great deal of his energy into it.

Kathleen Tynan, who edited her husband's letters, notes that of the seventy-nine plays produced during Kenneth Tynan's ten-year tenure at the National Theatre, more than half were "undisputed critical and box-office hits" and that "thirty-two of these were Ken's ideas; twenty were chosen with his collaboration." Some of the most interesting letters in *Kenneth Tynan: Letters* [1] have to do with Tynan's counsel, to Olivier and to other directors, about staging plays for the National Theatre. They reveal how he knew the theater from the inside (he is very good on matters of production) and from the out (he retained a fine sense of what does and does not stir an audience). He knew what makes a play work; he operated well as a play doctor.

He also had a program, a not-so-secret agenda, in mind for the National Theatre. "I once defined a critic as a man who knew the way but couldn't drive the car," he wrote. "As a back-seat driver at the National Theatre, I am putting that maxim to the test." He once said that a serious writer can adopt one of three attitudes toward the world: he can mirror its sadness and sickness; he can withdraw from it; or he can seek to change it. The third attitude was the only one he could countenance. In a then-novel twist on government support for the arts, he wrote to Laurence Olivier: "Subsidy gives us the chance—denied to movies and TV—of staking a line of our own, with no commercial pressures and without the neutralizing necessity of being 'impartial.' "

Tynan seemed for the most part to have a decent working relationship with Olivier, but his real problems were working with the government, specifically with the Lord Chamberlain, who functioned as the official censor of theatrical production, a job that went back as far as 1737 and Robert Walpole. Tynan argued with the Lord Chamberlain not only over what language could be used onstage but also over what plays could be staged. *Kenneth Tynan: Letters* provides a lengthy account over his wishing, in 1966, to stage Rolf Hochhuth's *Soldiers*, a play that more than suggested that Winston Churchill not only sanctioned a large number of civilian deaths by approving bombing of civilian targets but conspired to assassinate one Colonel Wlyadyslaw Sikorski, who, the play posited, was a reminder that Churchill had sold out the Poles in order to achieve his wartime goals.

The Lord Chamberlain argued that there was no authoritative evidence for any of this, and Tynan took the view that none was required—that a playwright could interpret history as he wished. The Lord Chamberlain countered that he would not permit the slandering of recent historical figures, at least under the auspices of a state-run theater. In Tynan's view, *Soldiers* is "the kind of play that can help the theater in general to fulfil its role as a public forum where history, art and morality are brought into one focus." The Lord Chamberlain and the view of the government's National Theatre Board, however, prevailed, though two years later, in 1968, the play was privately produced in Toronto, New York, and London, where it received good reviews but had only a short run.

But this incident was only further evidence of the politicization of Kenneth Tynan. From the outset, he was turned off by the inanities of English drawing-room comedy, and as early as 1958, in an attack on Eugene Ionesco, he went on record as looking for "evidence of the artist who is not content with the passive role of a symptom but concerns himself, from time to time, with such things as healing." He had gone from an art-for-art's-sake to an art-for-our-sake man—and in a big way. He

1 *Kenneth Tynan: Letters*, edited by Kathleen Tynan; Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 669 pages, £ 22. Publication of the letters in the United States has been scheduled, by Random House, for August 1996. *Kenneth Tynan: Profiles*, selected and edited by Kathleen Tynan and Ernie Eban, will also be published by Random House in August 1996.

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became the great proponent and exponent of Bertolt Brecht and the Berliner Ensemble, and, along with Eric Bentley, probably did more than any single critic to advance Brecht's reputation in the non-Communist world. "I have seen *Mother Courage* and I am a Marxist," he declared. Brecht's best plays, he announced in *The New Yorker*, "all deal with the tension between instinct, love, and emotion, on the one hand, and, on the other, a society that perverts or exploits all three." More and more, capitalist society, repressive and cruel, became the great villain for Tynan. In the words of an old Broadway musical comedy song, "Put the blame on Mame, boys."

It did not take Tynan long to join the herd of independent minds. His crowd in New York included Lillian Hellman, Richard Avedon, Dwight Macdonald, Jules Feiffer, and Norman Mailer, who admired him for his "extraordinary ability to get what he wanted out of the establishment without ever compromising himself fatally." He was among the signatories for the Fair Play for Cuba Committee. He marched in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament at Aldermaston (to which, his wife notes in her biography, he took a cab). Obsessed by the prospect of nuclear war, he was a better-red-than-dead man, and during the Cuban missile crisis, so nervous was he in the service of his beliefs, he actually purchased a single ticket for Australia. He was on the Who Killed Kennedy Committee. He became a regular letter-to-the-editor writer on behalf of all left-wing causes, including an attack, if you can fancy it, on the Common Market, a subject he must have thought about for a full ten minutes.

But Kenneth Tynan as a revolutionary, or even as a political intellectual, was never really very convincing. He liked success too much: large, naked, gaudy success. Even as a young man, as Kathleen Tynan notes, "he insisted on the best restaurants, the best tickets, and was rashly generous." Later in his life he wrote admiring *New Yorker* profiles on Johnny Carson, Mel Brooks, and Tom Stoppard, and what came through in these pieces above all was that these men had done it, had made it, had broken the bank. He, too, would have loved such a success, no doubt about it, but it was never to be available to him. He was instead condemned to live perpetually on the wharf, always hoping his ship would soon come in.

The closest shot Tynan had to a big score was with *Oh! Calcutta!* The idea for this revue of skits based on sexual fantasies was Tynan's and so was the organization and production of it. *Oh! Calcutta!* was the entering wedge of pornography onto the stage of what was once known as the "legitimate theater." Porno, slick and alluring, but porno pure and less than simple was the end and the intention of this revue. When Tynan wrote explaining it all to the late Terry Southern, whom he asked to contribute a sketch to the show, he added that there was to be "no crap about art or redeeming literary merit" about it, either. *Oh! Calcutta!*—after the French phrase *Quel cul t'as* (What an arse you have!)—was a New York, London, and indeed international hit and a part of the social history of the 1960s. Owing to a bad contract, over the years Tynan made only roughly a quarter of a million dollars on *Oh! Calcutta!*, peanuts when one comes to consider that the show is said to have grossed—just the right word, I believe—some $360 million.

Yet there is something appropriate about Kenneth Tynan's being the impresario of *Oh! Calcutta!* He was, after all, the first man to say "fuck" over the BBC. The occasion for his having done so was a discussion, with Mary McCarthy, about the censorship of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. It is sad to think that this, in the current cliché, defining moment may define a talented man down into posterity. Yet it was as a sex provocateur that Tynan came to be best known during the 1960s. When asked by Dick Cavett on his television talk show to define sexual decadence, Tynan replied: "It is whatever makes a man who thinks his ideas of sexuality are liberal, wince."

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Kathleen Tynan refers to her husband's romantic socialism, but what he really wanted to be, one supposes, was a Marxist of sex. It is of course an absurd thing to wish to be. Leaving aside here the question of who owns the means of production and the fact that in this realm the class struggle is a rather difficult thing to make out, all that is left is the notion of "to each according to his needs." Tynan's own needs were a bit odd. His taste ran to spanking girls, which is coming to seem *le vice anglais*. (Philip Larkin was also an enthusiast.) Kathleen Tynan tells of cleaning out her husband's things, after their separation, and discovering a Pandora's box of porno, which makes one think that perhaps having one's wife write one's biography isn't always a smashing idea.

For writers of Tynan's generation, sex was rarely viewed as a pleasant (chiefly) indoor sport. Instead it became half an ideology, and something like an alcohol substitute. As a way of clouding one's mind and destroying one's life, sex is nowhere near as efficient as alcohol. It can, however, make one look even more ridiculous. And the older one gets, the more ridiculous one begins to look. The young drama critic Kenneth Tynan once congratulated the actor Gerald Teale for portraying Mark Antony with "all the sadness of middle-aged lust, [but] without a vestige of its repulsiveness." Poor Tynan, in playing himself as the great sexual liberator of the age, was able to communicate only the repulsiveness of middle-aged lust and damned little of its sadness.

Tynan was planning a biography of Wilhelm Reich and a sequel to *Oh! Calcutta!* called *Carte Blanche*. He was one of those who goaded on the comedian Lenny Bruce with exaggerated praise for his putatively revolutionary comedy. "We miss him," Tynan wrote after Bruce's appearance in England, "and the nerve-fraying, jazz-digging, pain-hating, sex-loving, lie-shunning, bomb-loathing life he represents." Sex and politics, as in that quotation, washed together in Tynan's mind in the way they did in the 1960s generally. Logic, consistency, proportion, common sense didn't really matter. The Sixties, for Tynan, were, in a phrase of the day, "a gas."

Alas, lots of noxious fumes and debris were left when the party was over: broken marriages, regrets for work not done, self-recriminations for wretched political judgments (not many of these). In Tynan's case, there was the additional difficulty of his fragile health. The congenital weakness of the lungs, much worsened by his heavy smoking, resulted in a strong case of emphysema, which eventually killed him. In his later years, he had to seek out dry climates. Money was another problem. Lifelong, Tynan also smoked what Balzac, referring to plans for books that would never get written, called enchanted cigarettes. Along with the autobiography he never got round to writing and for which he was accepting publishers' advances right up to the end, he failed to finish his book on Reich as well as another book on why certain plays have survived, a pornographic book, an anthology of masturbation fantasies, a book about Olivier, a play, an erotic movie, and a great many other writing projects. The end of his life was a shambles. Living in Los Angeles, locked in a wheel chair, lashed to an oxygen tank, a bit player on the periphery of a world of show-business celebrities, he sat in the sun reading, his wife informs us, *The Fetishist Times*.

In a review of the play *Becket*, Tynan called Jean Anouilh "a quick but shallow thinker." Might not the same be said about him? Tynan, too, was wonderfully bright and quick, but did his culture, outside of the theater, run very deep? Was he in any way genuinely thoughtful? He had all sorts of opinions, but there is no evidence that, taken together, they added up to anything like an interesting point of view. He was talented, immensely talented, without being in the least original. In the end, he was a man of his time, and it was a low, dishonorable time.

Tynan might have ended a great drama critic, but there was a problem: a great

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drama critic needs great drama. The absence of a sustained serious drama is why there have been no truly great American drama critics. Almost by main force, Tynan tried to create a great drama out of the early work of John Osborne, Arnold Wesker, and above all Bertolt Brecht, to whom he wished to play the same cicerone's role that Shaw played for Ibsen. Perhaps he saw it couldn't be done and moved on.

So much did Tynan's ambition go beyond mere criticism that, late in life, he confessed that he hated writing. Pity, because it was the thing he did best. Such ideas as he had now seem less than hopeless, yet his accounts of actors in performance still hold up. What we know about the great actors of any age, we owe to the great drama critics: Hazlitt, Shaw, Beerbohm, Agate, and now Tynan. Writing about actors, Tynan still catches and keeps one's attention. His prose has the magic that genuine style makes manifest. Forty and more years after the fact, he can be read with pleasure on performances long stilled. Style, that great preservative, may in the end save Kenneth Tynan, even from the sad damned fool who had the good luck to possess it.

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Castle clown: Céline at Sigmaringen

by Jim Tuck

On June 14, 1957, Louis-Ferdinand Céline (1894–1961) gave an interview to the Paris weekly *L'Express*. *L'Express*, as Patrick McCarthy observes, was then a left-wing periodical and "had not yet been turned, by Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber, into a pale imitation of *Time*." The interview left Céline open to charges of being a double traitor. In early 1950, while in Danish exile, he had been condemned to a year in prison for wartime collaboration. In June 1951, pardoned by an amnesty that applied to World War I veterans, he returned to France. There he renewed contacts with a band of unrepentant ex-collaborators whose mouthpiece was the Paris daily *Rivarol*. Several, including Lucien Rebatet and Pierre-Antoine Cousteau, had served prison terms. Rebatet, a former music and film critic, spent the war years on the staff of the collaborationist paper *Je suis partout*. In 1942 he published *Les Décombres*, a powerful, bitter novel that blamed all France's woes on the Popular Front, the Jews, and left-wing intellectuals like André Malraux. Paying that sincerest of compliments, Rebatet wrote his novel in the frenetically impressionistic style of Céline. Cousteau, another *Je suis partout* staffer, had declared during the occupation that some *collabo* dailies were pressured by German censorship into adopting an anti-Semitic and pro-fascist position. By contrast, he and his colleagues were "just plain fascists and we would be the same even if all kinds of censorship were abolished."

The *Express* interview came as a bitter pill to the *Rivarol* hard-liners. First, Céline had granted an interview to a particularly vengeful post-Liberation journal, one that howled long and lustily for the heads of suspected collaborators. Second, his remarks during the interview veered between denial of his past and flippant nihilism, a stance always distasteful to the true believer. Yes, he had been an anti-Semite but was one no longer. Earlier, he had declared that he "grew to like (the Jews) a long time ago" and even offered to go live in Tel Aviv. No, he had never been a collaborator. In the German village of Sigmaringen, where Vichyites fleeing Resistance justice set up a government in exile, he was "in prison, in a cell." The Germans hated him. Had Hitler lived, he certainly would have had him shot.

Céline also offended with his buffoonery. To Madeleine Chapsal, the *Express* reporter, he said the only thing that mattered in writing was style. He sneered at ideologues of all stripes and was disarmingly—some said disgustingly—frank about his precarious financial situation. "If your paper offered me a lifetime annuity of 100,000 francs a month," he said, "I'd throw it all in for sure, I'd ban my works gladly, joyfully."

The *Express* interview was not intended as a gesture of absolution, the unveiling of a repentant "new" Céline. In remarks to Chapsal the author demonstrated that he had retained many of his racist and Eurocentric views. Though Hitler was "an idiot,"

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the German army in World War II had represented the best chance of creating a united Europe. While the Jews were no longer the main enemy, Céline had dire forebodings about white civilization being engulfed by the Yellow Peril. The interview was titled "Journey to the End of Hatred" (a takeoff on *Journey to the End of the Night*) and it sternly concluded that Céline's "monologue shed a harsh light on the mental processes of those, like him, who have chosen to hold mankind in contempt."

But the fiercest fire came from the Right. Though Rebatet felt more sorrow than anger, and continued to befriend Céline, Cousteau's reaction was one of outrage. Recalling that Céline's writings had caused many young Frenchmen to enlist in the Legion des Volontaires Français (a volunteer group formed to fight on the Russian front), Cousteau denounced him as an "irresponsible coward" who "was now washing his hands of them."

Tension between Céline and Cousteau's circle had been building up for some time. As early as 1948 Céline had vitriolically attacked Robert Brasillach, the *collabos*' leading literary martyr, who died before a firing squad in 1945. Brasillach, talented and impressionable, was particularly attracted to fascism's cult of virility. Was there something homosexual about this attraction? Céline thought so. In letters to his friend Albert Paraz, he excoriated "Saint-Brasillach" as a "Neronian pansy" and a "zealous little *Propaganda Staffel* clerk."

The *Express* interview brought this hostility between Céline and the *collabo* ultras out into the open. Cousteau, whose prison term represented reprieve from a death sentence, came out "convinced that the only absolute virtue is loyalty to one's friends." In two *Rivarol* articles he called Céline a "turncoat," accused him of rallying to "the gilded dungheap of the System," and sarcastically wondered why he wasn't now claiming to have been a member of the Resistance instead of merely a "victim."

The controversial interview was prompted by a book Céline published in 1957. Titled *D'un château l'autre*, it came out under the prestigious logo of Paris's Gallimard firm. In 1968 an English-language version appeared; its title was *Castle to Castle*. (Strictly speaking, the French title should have been *D'un château à l'autre*; the preposition was eliminated to conform to the tempo of Céline's breezy style.)

D'un château l'autre is unquestionably Céline's funniest book. The two castles in question are Vestre Faengsl in Copenhagen, where Céline was incarcerated between December 1945 and June 1947, and Sigmaringen, which housed top Vichy officials between September 1944 and April 21, 1945, when Free French troops overran the area.

Though some of the action takes place in Denmark, it is Céline's account of his days at Sigmaringen that dominates the narrative. The author, his wife Lucette, and Bébert, their cat, had fled Paris in June 1944, a few days after the Normandy landing. Céline's plan was to get to Denmark, where he had gold hidden. While waiting to obtain a Danish visa from the Nazi authorities, the Célines stopped first at Baden Baden, a luxury spa at the edge of the Black Forest. Though the pass for Denmark continued to elude him, in mid-September he was placed on a vast agricultural estate at Kränzlin, near Berlin. The estate was owned by a family named Scherz. The property housed several health agencies and Céline, who had a medical degree, was authorized to practice in Germany.

In October Céline was on the move again. His relations with the Scherz family were poor. The patriarch, eighty-year-old Erich, was a stiffly autocratic ex-cavalry officer, Prussian to the core. In *Nord*, a book based partly on his experiences at Kränzlin, Céline depicted Erich as a "notorious old goat who strove to sleep with the Polish girls on his estate or urinate on them." After the war, the outraged Scherz family brought suit for slander.

It was during his stay at Kränzlin that Céline first heard of the exiled French government at Sigmaringen. At odds with

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the Scherzes, he wished to be among his own countrymen. Céline wrote Fernand de Brinon, the minister whose office handled French interests in Germany, for permission to join the group. De Brinon immediately agreed; Céline was a doctor and his medical skills were needed.

Céline, Lucette, and the famous Bébert arrived at Sigmaringen in early November. Accompanying them was a gifted but half-crazed film actor named Robert Le Vigan. This bizarre individual figured in the first of many grim ironies that were to take place during Céline's Sigmaringen period. Le Vigan had exerted maximum pressure on Céline to abandon, at least temporarily, his plan of Danish refuge and come to Sigmaringen. When they arrived, they were informed that proof of employment was necessary to qualify for food and lodging vouchers. For Dr. Destouches (Céline's real name), this presented no problem. But Le Vigan's petition that he be allowed to serve as a nurse on Céline's staff was denied. Instead, he was faced with a brutal choice: expulsion from the community (which would have meant starvation or transfer to a concentration camp) or service as a radio broadcaster for Jean Luchaire, Commissioner of Information for the rump government. The broadcasts did Le Vigan immeasurable damage. As a hospital nurse, he would have been subject to only minor sanctions after the war; as a radio propagandist—a job he hated—he received a long prison term at hard labor.

The French community at Sigmaringen numbered 1,142 persons. Of these, only a chosen few lived at the castle. This elite included doddering Marshal Pétain, who refused to take any part in the government he nominally headed, Pierre Laval, also vastly disillusioned, de Brinon, Luchaire, and General Bridoux, the Vichy minister of war. Unlike Pétain and Laval, de Brinon, Luchaire, and Bridoux were "actives" who still clung to the hope of a German victory and behaved as if the Sigmaringen government were a valid political entity. To make room for the Vichy *priviligentzia*, the castle's rightful owners, members of the princely Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen family, were evicted and confined to lodgings in town. The castle, on a promontory overlooking the Danube, was noted not only for its fairy-tale aspect but for the eclecticism of its architecture, a mix of styles including gothic, neo-gothic, renaissance, and eighteenth- and nineteenth-century.

Living in town was the "proletariat of the collaboration," young ex-street fighters and brawlers who had belonged to "(Marcel) Bucard's Franciste Party, (Marcel) Déat's National Popular Youth, and (Joseph) Darnand's Militia." They lived in tents, abandoned buildings, or at the Bären and Löwen, two unprepossessing inns now packed to many times their normal capacity.

Facing rough-and-ready Resistance justice, these youthful paramilitaries sought solace in sex. Their partners were local German women, ranging from teenagers to grandmothers, and the railroad station functioned as a gigantic public brothel. Rising to the heights of his descriptive and comedic powers, Céline presents a tableau of unrestrained fornication while Allied bombers roared overhead. And always, Céline emphasizes, to the strains of "Lili Marlene." When not copulating, the lovers would group around a piano, lifting their voices in chorus after chorus of the Second World War's most popular song. The young French fascists were regularly joined in the nonstop station orgy by transient members of the German forces—*Wehrmacht* troops being shuttled to another front, stormtroopers from an SA detachment, and assorted European adventurers who had responded to the Waffen SS's appeal for non-German volunteers. Céline describes the latter as "Montenegrins, Czechoslovakians . . . Balto-Finns, soldiers of the European ragout!"

In his official capacity as physician to the French colony, Céline had ample opportunity to observe these scenes at first hand. In *D'un château l'autre* he writes wryly of "the whole waiting room and buffet ex-

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changing lice, scabies, syphilis, and love! females, pigtails, expectant mothers of all ages, grandmothers, soldiers! . . . the whole buffet singing in chorus! *Marleen*! *la*! *la*! G-sharp!"

The appalling sanitary conditions among the less privileged at Sigmaringen was Céline's main challenge. Lucien Rebatet describes the Löwen, where he and Céline lived, as a "stifling slum." When not treating militiamen or scabies and gonorrhea, Céline did his best to improve hygiene at the Löwen. In a hotel built for thirty people and housing 150, with only a few hall toilets, it must have been a nightmare for the public sanitation specialist that Céline had been in his youth. But what emerges from his account is not self-pity but a series of hilarious images. Particularly striking is that of Herr Frucht, the Löwen's harassed manager, poking and stirring clogged toilet bowls with his faithful bamboo pole. Herr Frucht's bamboo pole is as symbolic of Céline's book as Bébert, the Célines' street-wise Montmartre tomcat. The public sanitation crisis at the Löwen was partly caused by the inn's staple fare. This was the infamous *Stammgericht*, a vile concoction of red cabbage, turnips, rutabaga, and kohlrabi. With such a comestible—described by Céline as "guaranteed to put you on the toilet for life"—it is little wonder that Herr Frucht's bamboo pole was so repeatedly pressed into service.

It was as a medical rather than literary man that the better side of Céline's nature emerges. This scribbler of scurrilous anti-Semitic pamphlets was also the kindly doctor who bought drugs and medicines with his own money, never took a penny for his services, procured black-market morphine from Switzerland, and, according to Lucien Rebatet, "was an excellent children's doctor."

One beneficiary of Céline's kindness was the oldest of the French exiles, a dying ninety-year-old woman whom Céline treated whenever he could. She was the mother of Abel Bonnard, former Vichy minister of education. Despite his high rank, Bonnard was not invited to live in the castle. He and his mother were lodged in a two-room apartment in town, a modest accommodation but one far superior to such hell-holes as the Bären and Löwen. Bonnard's exclusion from the castle was prompted by homophobia. He was considered a figure of fun among the top *collabos* and even venerable Marshal Pétain habitually referred to him as *la Gestapette*, a play on words that roughly translates as "Gestapo faggot." Bonnard, an elegant sexegenarian and member of the French Academy (expelled during the Liberation), retaliated with a series of catty witticisms. Darnand, the militia chief of staff, was the "chief of distaff." Rebatet was "a man crushed under his own ruins." (A send-up of Rabatet's best-selling *Les Décombres*, which in English would be *The Ruins*.) Bonnard's shafts also extended to political enemies. The gigantic de Gaulle was "a dwarf who has been considerably stretched, except for the top floor."

Céline himself was not above gay-bashing, and some of his characterizations are most unfair. He refers to François Mauriac, the Catholic Nobel Prize winner, as a "vaseline ass." Mauriac and such other Céline *bêtes noires* as Jean-Paul Sartre, André Malraux, and Louis Aragon are depicted in *D'un château l'autre* as men who enjoy "a little fun in the urinals." Yet there is no reference to Bonnard's sexual preferences. One suspects that Céline's reticence here had something to do with the marvelous rapport he developed with Bonnard's mother. His visits to her were more than house calls. As Céline listened entranced, the dying old lady, cultured and charming, recited long excerpts from the love poetry of Christine de Pisan and Louise Labé.

Céline's mordant profiles of the leading *collabos* were undoubtedly tinged with envy. While the majority of the exiles lived in squalor, Marshal Pétain had sixteen food cards and de Brinon six or eight, Céline isn't sure which. De Brinon was a favorite target of Céline's mockery. Pompous and snobbish, he was *comte* de Brinon in France and

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never let anybody forget it. We can share Céline's mirth over the plaque that appeared on the door of de Brinon's office at the castle. It read "Graf von Brinon," the German form of his name and title.

Céline was also vastly amused that de Brinon, the master collaborator, had a Jewish wife. Fortunately for Madame de Brinon, she never had to endure the ordeal of living among her virulently anti-Semitic compatriots at Sigmaringen. By special arrangement, she was allowed to take up residence in the picturesque lake town of Constance, about thirty miles south of the castle. Though on German soil, Constance enjoyed a uniquely privileged status throughout the war. The town was never bombed or even blacked out. Thanks to a secret deal between the Germans and the Allies, Constance functioned as a neutral oasis whose stores were full and restaurants flourishing. If Céline is to be believed, the jam, chocolate, canned goods, and caviar so easily available in Constance were parachuted in by the RAF.

While Sarah de Brinon enjoyed the comfort of Constance, her husband sought diversion in the arms of Simone Mitre, his French-fascist secretary-mistress. Madame Mitre is one of the few exiles who comes off well at Céline's hands. "A big-hearted woman and full of tact," she had the thankless job of handling the vast number of complaints that came to de Brinon's office. She and Céline remained friends after the war and she was a mourner at his funeral.

Simone Mitre's celebrated tact could do nothing to prevent a highly unpleasant interview that Céline had with de Brinon. Céline's difficulties with the minister were partly of his own creation. Waggishly he had helped circulate a rumor that de Brinon himself was Jewish and that his real name was Cohen. As de Brinon listened with somber indifference, Céline begged for more medicines to treat his tubercular children and clap-ridden militiamen. Only once did de Brinon brighten up. ("Oh yes, Doctor, one thing . . . I've got news for you!") Reaching across his desk, he handed Céline a notice informing him that he had been sentenced to death by a Resistance committee. But Céline, who died in bed in 1961, had the last laugh. De Brinon, described by the prosecutor at his trial as a "total traitor," was executed in 1947.

Céline also had great fun with another *collabo* aristocrat, Alphonse de Châteaubriant. Dignified and white-bearded, the elderly Châteaubriant was a leading intellectual among the exiles. A novelist and former winner of the Goncourt Prize, Châteaubriant founded an organization called Groupe Collaboration in 1940. More cultural than political in nature, Groupe Collaboration was dedicated to Franco-German cooperation in the sphere of letters and the arts. In his capacity as colony doctor, Céline was occasionally invited to the castle. One evening he received a dinner invitation from Châteaubriant and Otto Abetz, the official appointed by Hitler to supervise Franco-German collaboration. Céline was served a Spartan repast of radishes, porridge, and one slice of sausage, which his companions did not share. Cynically, he realized that Châteaubriant and Abetz would be gorging themselves on caviar, leg of lamb, and champagne the moment he left the room.

With this reminder of his second-class status, Céline needed little incentive to draw searing word-portraits of Châteaubriant and Abetz. If his narrative is accurate, the old Goncourt Prize winner had become quite dotty. Châteaubriant had a plan to win the war. He would go to the Austrian Tyrol with a few trusted associates, to "an absolutely inaccessible valley . . . between three mountain peaks . . . and there, there, Céline . . . we shall perfect our bomb!"

Hoffmann, a German diplomat who had joined the group, misunderstood Châteaubriant. "This bomb," he asked, "what are you going to make it out of?"

"Oh, my dear Hoffmann . . . not a bomb of steel! or dynamite! . . . a bomb of concentration! of faith, Hoffmann . . . a stupendous moral bomb!" The crazed old man continued his verbal meanderings, culmi-

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nating in an ecstatic tribute to Wagner's music. He began to whistle "The Ride of the Valkyries," then to hum it, then to mime the trumpet solo with an ice pick.

At this point Abetz made a fatal mistake: he told Châteaubriant he was out of tune. Châteaubriant was stunned—but only for a moment. Instantly, rapture was replaced by rage. Picking up a saucer, he hurled it against the wall. Then another saucer. Then a plate. Then another plate. "The nerve of this Abetz punk telling him his Valkyrie wasn't right! the arrogance of that upstart!" As Abetz, Céline, and Hoffmann cowered under a table, Châteaubriant continued his crockery-smashing rampage. It ended only when Myrta, the old man's adored spaniel, put her tail between her legs and ran howling from the room. Châteaubriant limped after her and the mad hatter's party came to end.

Céline is equally derisive about the Germans at Sigmaringen. Though the *collabos* were supposed to be their allies, the Germans knew the war was lost. General Leclerc's Free French army, with its Senegalese detachments, was in Strasbourg, only sixty miles away. As Céline sardonically notes, the Germans did everything in their power to make life miserable for the French exiles and make points with their conquerors of the very near future. The day Leclerc and his dreaded Africans marched into Sigmaringen, every German in town wanted to have "resistance" credentials.

This attitude was typified by the actions of Franz Traub, director of the German hospital. Though he liked Céline personally, he denied his every request for supplies and medicines. Traub listened regularly to the BBC; the closer Leclerc approached, the nastier he was to the *collabos*. Eventually he denied the militiamen use of the hospital, claiming they had defecated in the bathtubs and then smeared "for Adolf" on the walls.

Particularly petty was Traub's treatment of Jean Luchaire's daughter. Corinne Luchaire had been a film star in Paris before the war. During the occupation, while Luchaire was a leading *collabo* journalist, Corinne carried on a series of affairs with German officers. She accompanied her father to Sigmaringen and there contracted tuberculosis. Traub barred her from the hospital. Following Céline's entreaties he "relented"—but only to the extent of letting her come in for an X ray. Jean Luchaire was executed in 1945 and the following year Corinne was stigmatized by "national indignity," a legal status depriving the bearer of all civil rights. In 1950, at the age of thirty, she died of tuberculosis.

With all hope of victory gone, Céline claimed the Germans grew to hate the *collabos* even more than they did the Jews. Whether this is true or not, Céline was never more on target than when he passionately articulated his dilemma in a heated conversation with Abetz. "You. Abetz . . . even one hundred percent defeated, crushed, occupied by forty-nine victor powers . . . you'll still be loyal, dutiful German, honor and the fatherland! defeated but legitimate! while a damn fool like me will always be a stinking filthy traitor, fit to be hanged! . . . a disgrace to my brothers and the Fifis! [1] . . . you'll admit there's a difference, Monsieur Abetz?"

Céline's account of his relations with Marshal Pétain begins on a note of self-mockery. Pétain's physician, Dr. Ménétrel, had just been arrested and de Brinon suggested Céline as his replacement. "I'd rather die right away!" was Pétain's contemptuous rejoinder.

This was more an expression of pique than a reflection on Céline's professional competence. Ménétrel, an old friend and confidant of Pétain, was arrested because de Brinon and the "actives" believed he was influencing the marshal against taking any part in the rump government. Mistakenly believing that Céline was one of de Brinon's creatures, Pétain rejected him out of hand.

In the end, Ménétrel was replaced by a man even less politically correct than he

1 The French Forces of the Interior served as the military arm of the Resistance.

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was. The new doctor, Schillemans, was a French medical officer hastily yanked out of a prisoner-of-war camp.

Schillemans had the distinction of being the only Frenchman at Sigmaringen who was not a collaborator. He didn't last long. After a few weeks he asked to be returned to camp; he didn't want to be compromised by staying on at Sigmaringen. In a rage, de Brinon had Schillemans arrested and charged with desertion and treason. But Céline effectively intervened on his behalf and Schillemans was sent back to his stalag.

Greatly indebted to Céline, Schillemans expounded on his role at Sigmaringen in several postwar articles. Recording how frequently Céline baited the Germans to their faces, he speaks of his "irresistible clownishness" and of the contrast between the author's "great, hungry eyes" and his "mocking voice, his sense of humor, and the slapstick-nightclub-singer-from-Montmartre side of him."

Nowhere was Céline more the mocking clown than in his relations with Pierre Laval. Though born in Paris, Céline's ancestry was Norman-Breton and he harbored a lifelong racial antipathy for the "Mediterranean bastards" of southern France. Laval was from Auvergne, a coal-producing province of notably swarthy-skinned people. In allusions to Laval in *D'un château l'autre*, he refers to him as "a greasy Arab with his ebony cowlick" and "the Abdullah of the Third Republic." During the occupation Céline had also called Laval a Jew.

Laval was well aware of this. Still, he treated Céline with silky politeness during an interview in his office. He maneuvered Céline into agreeing with him on a minor point and then sprung his trap. "You agree with a Jew?" he asked. Céline was momentarily speechless and Laval pressed his advantage. "You did call me a Jew, didn't you, Doctor? Yes, I know, you weren't the only one . . . There was also *Je suis partout*." (The Paris daily that employed Rebatet and Cousteau.)

Céline's response was a masterpiece of impudence. "Not in so many words . . . they didn't call you that in so many words! But I did, Monsieur la Président!"

"Ah, I like that! Right to my face!" Unlike Céline's other "Jew," the gloomy de Brinon, Laval had a sense of humor. He burst out laughing and Céline concluded that "he wasn't a bad sort."

But that didn't stop Céline from railing at Laval for failing to send him to some safe spot overseas, where he could be secure from both the Resistance and the Nazis. He could easily have been sent in some sort of diplomatic or official capacity. Céline began reeling off a list of names—people for whom Laval had "found a spot." Paul Morand had been named Vichy ambassador to Switzerland, and Admiral Robert had been posted to Martinique. (Josée Laval was married to the Franco-American Count de Chambrun who, as a descendant of Lafayette, enjoyed dual citizenship.)

As Céline continued to reproach Laval—"you could have found a spot for me"—Laval picked up the phone and summoned another castle-dweller to be a witness to Céline's complaints. Jean Bichelonne was a brilliant technocrat who had served as Vichy minister of industrial production. In contrast to the "Afro-Asiatic" Laval, Bichelonne was blond, fair, had a huge head, and resembled a "giant spermatozoid."

Completely indifferent to the Céline-Laval dispute, the sensitive Bichelonne was in a state of nervous trauma because a windowpane in his room had been broken. Was it a rock? or maybe a bullet from the street? With Bichelonne pacing up and down, totally occupied with his problem, Céline said Laval was "wasting his breath" in denying Céline's charge that he was being sacrificed "so the niggers of Leclerc's army would find me here and chop me into small pieces."

The Alice-in-Wonderland episode came to an end when Laval finally agreed to appoint Céline governor of the remote North Atlantic islands of St. Pierre and Miquelon. Céline had been there in 1938, the Celtic side of his nature entranced by the perpetual mist and fog that enshrouded these barren

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outposts of French civilization. A decade later, when he was writing *D'un château l'autre*, he both mocked and affirmed his appointment: "The main thing: I was appointed Governor . . . I'm still Governor!"

After his pardon, Céline and Lucette bought a rundown villa in lower Meudon, southwest of Paris, for which they paid $7,150. There he resumed medical practice, setting up a clinic for the poor, while Lucette gave dance lessons. But they had few amenities and no luxuries. As a man who misanthropically reveled in his unpopularity, Céline claimed that he was hated by all his neighbors. This was exaggeration. A few shopkeepers treated him coldly, occasional handbills were nailed to telephone poles—but that was all. Despite his dire predictions of assassination attempts, Céline was never physically harmed. And, in due time, the handbills disappeared and the merchants' attitude changed from hostility to indifference.

Happily for the reader, Céline's delusion that he was the object of massive hatred served as a springboard for some of his funniest and most scathing criticisms of postwar consumerist society. He was a doctor who made house calls—and on foot! He was a traitor, a *collabo*, a pornographer, a quack, and, "worst of all for my reputation: 'He hasn't got a car!' " To this new generation of materialists, the sidewalk was a place fit only for muggers and prostitutes.

L'Express would get back to Céline. In May 1960, following the publication of *Nord*, Jean-Louis Bory lyrically acclaimed this "picaro of the Paris suburbs, this verbal dynamiter, this churlish Pierrot . . . this detestable, inspired, doddering geezer, this awesome old clown in a circus magnified to the scale of our planet . . ."

These dithyrambic lines are a fairer and more judicious assessment of Céline than the cold appraisal of 1957. For the raucous, anarchic, and Rabelaisian manner in which this "fascist" demolished his fascist colleagues in *D'un château l'autre*, Louis-Ferdinand Céline deserves the partial rehabilitation that has come to him.

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The last critic? The importance of F. R. Leavis

by Paul Dean

To American readers the name F. R. Leavis (1895–1978) may signify little more than half-remembered phrases and controversies —the Great Tradition, the Two Cultures— now surely, it might be thought, relegated to literary history. In England, Leavis's influence has waned but his name still evokes strong reactions, as the reviews of Ian MacKillop's new biography show.[1] Leavis is variously described as "neurotic," "petty," "authoritarian," "impossibly haughty," exhibiting "suppressed hysteria" or "crazed paranoia"; he is mocked as "the good doctor," surrounded by "disciples," his life "claustrophobically book-based." As for his critical achievements, we hear from one writer that "he was often conspicuously wrong," from another that he made "often extraordinarily dumb judgements about fiction, such as the absurd idea that *Lady Chatterley* is better than *Women in Love*"—a valuation Leavis made in 1930 and withdrew in 1955 and again in 1961. Yet another reviewer refers to *Dickens the Novelist* (1970) as Leavis's "last major work," although there were three books left to come, all of them important. Of course, the reviewers all agree that the man they are treating with such personal contempt, patronizing distortion, and simple inaccuracy was fantasizing when he voiced the opinion that he was being misrepresented, or that some people considered themselves his enemies, or that the London literary establishment was out to get him. "They say I have persecution mania," he remarked once. "Comes of being persecuted, you know." An unimpeachable source.

Not that such viciousness was rare during Leavis's lifetime. Dr. MacKillop tells the story of the meeting which was arranged, at Leavis's request, to discuss the appointment of someone of whom he disapproved to the lectureship established in his honor after he had retired from full-time teaching at Cambridge. One of those turning up to the meeting, John Newton, said that he wanted to call Leavis a liar. Someone else said that this might kill Leavis: Newton replied, "Yes, but at least he'd die in the truth." I remember these (to me) shocking words whenever I read of Leavis's "vindictiveness."

I saw him only once, in 1972 when, persuaded to make the journey by a former pupil who was a senior faculty member at my university in the north of England, he came to give his lecture "Reading Out Poetry." The lecture room was packed to overflowing. At the appointed hour Leavis, then seventy-seven and looking it, was ushered in, still wearing a shabby fawn raincoat over his jacket. After the chairman's introduction he took from his briefcase a dog-eared manuscript which he began to read in

1 *F. R. Leavis: A Life in Criticism*, by Ian MacKillop; Allen Lane/The Penguin Press (London), 476 pages, £25. As yet this book is not scheduled for publication in the United States.

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a semi-audible monotone—a deliberate ploy, I later discovered, to frustrate those who had come expecting a "performance" rather than out of genuine interest in what he had to say. Nevertheless, there *was* a performance at one point. In pursuit of his contention that to arrive at a satisfactory reading-out of a great poem was in itself an act of interpretation, challenging all one's resources of intelligence and sensitivity, Leavis did some reading-out with interpolated commentaries. Eventually he came to the last speech of Othello. This prompted him to explain how he despised actors who treated Shakespeare as providing them with an opportunity to display their "eloquence"; and he mentioned with particular scorn Sir Laurence Olivier, whose performance as Othello had reportedly been influenced by Leavis's essay on the play. Then, raising his head and raking the room with still-magnificent eyes, he jerked out in increasingly *forte* bursts: "Olivier! That . . . old Etonian . . . *golden-voiced* . . . NARCISSUS!" (Olivier was not of course an old Etonian—Leavis was typecasting.) Since this was the only sentence everyone had been able to hear, there was laughter and applause. Leavis subsided, resuming his former quiet delivery. At the end of an hour he broke off with a weary gesture—"I must end there, my voice has gone." The chairman, somewhat nervously, invited questions. There were none. How could there be?

I didn't find the lecture impressive. I had only been at university a year, and didn't have the intellectual equipment to make a qualified judgment on Leavis. Worse, I didn't know I wasn't qualified, and mocked with the others. Only in reading him, subsequently, have I come to realize how well he described himself, in that lecture, when he characterized the good reader as

> the ideal executant musician, the one who, knowing it rests with him to re-create in obedience to what lies in black print on the white sheet in front of him, devotes all his trained intelligence, sensitiveness, intuition, and skill to re-creating, reproducing faithfully what he divines his composer essentially conceived.[2]

Dr. MacKillop's is not an authorized biography. Denied access to crucial papers, he falls back too much on secondhand testimony, and his coverage of Leavis's life is patchy (for instance, there is no mention of the one visit Leavis and his wife made to the United States, in 1966). Much of his material necessarily consists of academic minutiae which could only be made gripping by a livelier style than his. Moreover, when he comes to the indisputably painful episodes in the lives of Leavis and his wife, Dr. MacKillop is compromised by a delicacy of feeling perfectly proper to an ex-pupil (which he is) but not ideal in a biographer. In the end, of course, the emphasis ought to be on what in fact Leavis achieved as a literary critic: but even here MacKillop, like almost everyone else, slights or ignores the books of the 1970s. His book is better than nothing, and it expands valuably the perspectives of the collection of essays edited by Denys Thompson, *The Leavises: Recollections and Impressions* (1984). However, it makes no reference to some important biographical essays published since then. It certainly does not represent a definitive account of Leavis's life and works.

Leavis was Cambridge born and bred. His father, a Victorian rationalist and "centre of human power" (the son's phrase), kept a piano shop opposite the gates of Downing College, which was later to be Leavis's center of operations for so many years. After a year he joined the Friends' Ambulance Unit, in 1915, and was present at the Somme—an experience, rarely afterward alluded to, which left an indelible memory. It's not difficult to imagine how monstrously unreal academic History must have

2 The lecture may be found in a posthumously published volume by Leavis, *Valuation in Criticism and Other Essays*, edited by G. Singh (Cambridge University Press, 1986). This also contains the first essays Leavis contributed to *The Cambridge Review* at the start of his career.

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seemed to him on his return to Cambridge in 1919. He switched to English, then in its infancy as a degree subject, and graduated with first-class Honours in 1921—an achievement all the more astonishing when we know that his father died, following an accident, on the morning of his last examination paper. Despite his good degree, Leavis was not seen as a strong candidate for one of the scarce research fellowships. He embarked on a Ph.D., then a distinctly lowly career move for an aspiring academic. His thesis, on the relationship between literature and journalism in the eighteenth century, was supervised by the flamboyant professor of English (and ex–Fleet Street man) Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, and examined by George Saintsbury. It's striking to think of these sturdy Victorian figures, born respectively in 1863 and 1845, giving their blessing to Leavis's work; but then a case could be made for his being, in curious ways, closer to their world than might first appear.

After receiving his doctorate in 1924, Leavis must have thought a move to a lectureship would be swift; but circumstances went against him, and perhaps not only those, for Quiller-Couch had written privately of his pupil's "Self-Sufficiency" as an ominous trait: "no good fortune would easily equal his sense of his deserts." He subsisted on free-lance teaching—"hand-to-mouth disease" as I. A. Richards called it—for a number of colleges; one of his pupils, Queenie Roth, became his wife in 1929. Dr. MacKillop cannot, for many reasons, do full justice to the figure of Mrs. Leavis. She was a more confidently ambitious person than her husband, and on the novel, in my view, a greater critic than he. Her Ph.D. thesis, published in 1932 as *Fiction and the Reading Public*, had been supervised by I. A. Richards, but relations between them, already uneasy, broke down when he failed to support her after her parents bitterly opposed her intention to marry outside the Jewish faith. Despite a string of brilliant scholarly publications (now mostly gathered in three volumes of her *Collected Essays*, published by Cambridge University Press), she never attained an official university teaching post; instead she continued free-lancing, as well as playing a major role in the editing of *Scrutiny*, contributing officially and unofficially to her husband's books, and bringing up three children. Leavis was rather in awe of her; he described her as "the embodiment of passionate will," and once exclaimed, "They talk of the atom bomb—there's enough energy in my wife to blow Europe to pieces!" Certainly she worked with amazing intensity, especially when one remembers that she was for years gravely ill. Not all the biographical facts about Mrs. Leavis are available, and speculation would be impertinent, but there is enough to warrant the detection of a psychological pattern of rejection which became more pronounced with time.

For years the Leavises watched as their contemporaries, and eventually their juniors, blossomed in careers while they languished. Dr. MacKillop is surprisingly reluctant to endorse Leavis's belief that his progress was blocked by enemies within the Faculty. How else are we to explain the facts: that his appointment in 1932 was followed—in 1936—by only a part-time university lectureship which was not made full-time until 1947, promotion to Reader (the next grade below full Professor) coming in 1959 when he was three years away from retirement? It was a ludicrously mean way in which to reward his achievements. Not until retirement did honorary chairs, at Bristol and York, come his way; he endured years of financial hardship, with damaging consequences for his pension, on top of family problems (his wife's ill health, the breakdown and estrangement of one of their sons). In the face of all this he worked unremittingly, never taking a sabbatical term or a proper holiday, and publishing his last book at the age of eighty-one. Thereafter, until his death two years later, he slowly declined into senility. Dr. MacKillop gives a harrowing account of this sad period, during which Mrs. Leavis reported

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Leavis as saying, "I am wretched. I am in despair." He would often tell his pupils that Blake died singing. He himself, alas, did not.

Why should a life which was, in many ways, so uneventful have been so stormy? Leavis's temperament, like his wife's, was not an easy one, and not well suited to the kind of academic life which flourishes in England. University teachers, not only at Cambridge, often value good manners more than the disinterested pursuit of the truth, and laugh (because of embarrassment and deep-buried guilt) at people who "take it all too seriously." No one took it more seriously than Leavis. Unfailingly courteous and sympathetic, by all accounts, to his pupils, he was not urbane, and saw no need to be polite to colleagues whom he felt to be in error or worse. He was a tireless antagonist—"Eight stone, fighting weight" he would say of himself proudly—and unbeatable in discussion. He never simply won: he annihilated. His sense of professional responsibility offended the Cambridge worship of "good form"; he wouldn't play the game, wouldn't be hypocritical for the sake of getting on with people. The inevitable accusations of paranoia combined with his and Mrs. Leavis's suspicion of former friends and colleagues; there were accusations of betrayal and painful scenes from which no one emerged with credit. The fascination of reviewers with these battles, however initially understandable, becomes ultimately tedious. Who, at this distance of time, has the right to adjudicate such disputes? What we know of the facts makes us certain that the cost in personal terms for all concerned was ruinous. Is that not enough?

No estimate of Leavis's criticism can ignore its origin in the classroom: as Dr. MacKillop excellently says, "His teaching was a way of being a person" (though little of the individuality of that teaching is conveyed in the biography). The charges of narrowness often brought against him are unsustainable: he wrote about far more authors than people realize (over thirty in *Revaluation* alone), and had read far more authors than those about whom he wrote—not just in English, either. As a teacher, however, he had responsibilities toward students whose time was limited. Most undergraduates would barely have time to read—*really* read, not just skim-and-look-at-the-criticism—the major works of English literature, let alone those "strangely neglected" minor figures. Almost all Leavis's books were worked out in classroom and lecture hall, a fact which must be borne in mind when considering their self-imposed limitations and economies. One must add that he despised colleagues who crammed students for the examinations, and that he insisted on a far wider range of reading than was usual ("Cultivate promiscuity" he would say picturesquely)—but he would not waste his pupils' time on irrelevancies. Everything he himself had to say was fresh and firsthand. An undergraduate noted of his lectures in 1928, "the fact that his arguments are always founded on the works of the authors themselves makes them unassailable on their own premises"—clearly this was both novel and exasperating!

In the crudest terms for measuring a teacher's success—examination results—Leavis must be rated highly, though the consistently good performance of his pupils led to jealousy and to the first whisperings about cliques and disciples; in less definable but more important terms his influence reverberated far beyond the specific texts to which he was addressing himself. His teaching was a mode of life, of thought; something Dr. MacKillop hits off in saying that he "allowed students to experience the pains of seriousness" (this appears in the review-caricatures as joyless Puritanism). Profiting from the autonomy of colleges within the Cambridge system, Leavis, secure at Downing, could defy his critics and carry on teaching as he wished. That this did not always work to his pupils' advantage, in worldly terms, is undeniable; denied permanent posts at Cambridge, they frequently went abroad. Yet it is absurd of

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Marius Bewley (who applied Leavis's ideas extensively to American literature) to complain, as Dr. MacKillop records, that Leavis should have thought more about the consequences of his actions on students who "have expended years, energy, and money, to study with him, and enlarge his reputation." If that was their aim, they should have reconsidered the propriety of their motives. Conversely, no real teacher imagines that the goal of his work is an enhanced reputation—as if that mattered! Leavis is the only great critic who has earned his living as a teacher: and we are all his pupils.

Leavis's writing will not fit into neat classifications, but four broad phases can be distinguished. In the first—the period of his early pamphlets and of *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932) and *Revaluation* (1936)—he was mainly preoccupied with rewriting, under Eliot's influence, the history of English poetry from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries, and with sketching his view of the nature and purpose of university education. In the second he turned his attention to the novel, probably at his wife's instigation; this is the period of *The Great Tradition* (1948) and *D. H. Lawrence, Novelist* (1955). From the time of his lecture *Two Cultures: The Significance of C. P. Snow* (1962) Leavis sought a more eclectic treatment of literary, educational, and social issues; the central focus remained literature but the perspective from which he commented was enlarged, so that *English Literature in Our Time and the University* (1969) is quite different from *Education and the University* (1943), just as *Dickens the Novelist* (1970, with Q. D. Leavis) is quite different from the book on Lawrence. This phase of Leavis's work, the "higher pamphleteering" as he called it, reaches its apogee in *Nor Shall My Sword: Discourses on Pluralism, Compassion, and Social Hope* (1972). The fourth and final phase is in many ways the most interesting of all. It consists of two books, *The Living Principle: "English" as a Discipline of Thought* (1975), and *Thought, Words, and Creativity: Art and Thought in Lawrence* (1976), to both of which *Nor Shall My Sword* acts as a curtain-raiser. Here Leavis branches out into areas of thought which must be described—despite his resistance to the term—as philosophical. Such a grouping of his books leaves out of account, of course, the collections of essays *The Common Pursuit* (1952) and *"Anna Karenina" and Other Essays* (1967) as well as much of his writing in *Scrutiny* and some posthumously published material (Dr. MacKillop gives a full list). I shall try to say something briefly about each phase in turn.

Leavis was much struck by Eliot's early critical works *The Sacred Wood* and *Homage to John Dryden*, as well as by Eliot's poetry, and he hailed Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, in a review, as containing "more of the history of English poetry" than in any other book he knew. Empson's own poetry, too, was unusually impressive. (Yet later, as Dr. MacKillop reports, he would say, "If you want a character study of Empson, go to Iago.") *Revaluation* and *New Bearings* accepted Eliot's catchphrase "dissociation of sensibility" as corresponding to something real in social and literary history during the seventeenth century: and they reflected, although in a less intense and pyrotechnic fashion, Empson's insistence on analysis as the route to understanding. The nineteenth century was seen as a diversion from the genuine in poetic language (Leavis would later argue that poetry in this period is to be found in the novel rather than in the formal verse); Eliot and Pound had rediscovered the strengths of seventeenth-century poetry—its complex fusion of tones, its wit which was not joke-making but the detached yet engaged play of cultivated minds over the widest range of human experience, its subordination of metric to the cadences of the speaking voice—and had managed to apply it in poems which, far from being pastiche, were unmistakably modern in their idiom and preoccupations. Victorian dream-worlds had been ousted by Metaphysical nervous strength. This view en-

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tailed a reconsideration of the "mellifluous" tradition coming down from Spenser through Milton to Tennyson. Those poets were not (as is often said) simply dismissed, nor was their classicism written off. Many early English teachers at Cambridge were classicists by training, and assumed that the evaluative criteria they were in the habit of applying to Greek and Latin verse could be transferred to English verse: Leavis maintained that this would lead to little beyond "aesthetic" (a word he detested) appreciation which absolved the aesthete from critical thinking. Milton comes alive, for instance, when he is close to Shakespeare in part of *Comus*, in ways which are absent from his attempts to imitate Latin verse in English; a comparable alertness to Shakespeare's language would benefit Milton's critics too, Leavis hints.

Read without *a priori* assumptions these books can still teach us, not only about the specific passages and poets they discuss, but more broadly about what it is to have one's own grasped history of English literature—not something mugged up from text books but an indwelt possession. How to achieve this was also Leavis's concern in his educational writings of this period, *How to Teach Reading* (1932), a response to Ezra Pound's *How to Read* which elicited from Pound a characteristic riposte ("*balls and shit*"), and *Education and the University*. Despite the widespread assumption that Leavis had no sense of history or was nostalgic or sentimental about it—that he was a "refugee in a never-never-land of the past" in J. H. Plumb's sneering phrase—it is plain from his "Sketch for an 'English School'" in *Education and the University* that his historical sense was both cultivated and extraordinarily delicate. It is true that he had no time for "literary history" as "background" (and showed in controversies with F. W. Bateson and W. W. Robson how vacuous "historical scholarship" was when it was made to substitute for criticism), but he emphatically believed that a literary critic should be educated about history. What he asserted was that, while literary texts could never stand by themselves, context-free (so that the common assimilation of Leavis to the New Critics in America is a bizarre mistake), yet there were criteria of relevance to be observed, and in the end the critic's judgment, however well-informed by other considerations, was a literary one. However, he wanted English departments to act as "liaison-centres" for the humanities in universities, providing in the texts a focus in which specialists could meet, contributing from their different perspectives. Tireless in campaigning for this ideal to be put into practice, he nonetheless sensed, as a realist, that he fought a losing battle. As early as 1970 he warned against

> the more and more matter-of-course view that a university is so much plant that should be kept in full production all year round, its staff made to *earn* their salaries, and its management governed by strict cost-efficiency recommendations.

Twenty-five years ago this might have seemed melodramatic: now it is sober fact. That is how a modern university is run, in Britain and America. Leavis knew, as we do, that in such an establishment no education can take place.

Before leaving this first group of Leavis's writings I ought to stress how much Eliot's practice, as well as his criticism, mattered to Leavis. He had early given offense to the Cambridge establishment in his first published article, "T. S. Eliot—a Reply to the Condescending" (1929). "The Condescending" was F. L. Lucas, a don at King's College who had reviewed *For Lancelot Andrewes* as "a pleasant little volume written by a man who is evidently fond of reading . . ."! Leavis saw that Eliot's concept of tradition and of the dynamic relationship between the poetry of the past and of the present—his idea of literature as an *order*, an organic whole—offered the solution to the problem of establishing a critical judgment as more than merely personal, a problem Leavis wrestled with all his life. His discus-

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sions of Eliot in *New Bearings* and *Education and the University*, which take in the poetry up to the first three of the *Quartets*, are more approving than his later re-assessments, and his personal contacts with Eliot were never easy (he believed himself to be the "other" of the vision in *Little Gidding*). Eliot was the figure against whom, and in opposition to whom, Leavis was always defining himself. He would have reacted with mixed feelings to this appraisal appearing in a magazine called *The New Criterion*.

On the first page of *The Great Tradition* Leavis remarked wryly that "the view . . . will be . . . attributed to me that, except Jane Austen, George Eliot, James, and Conrad, there are no novelists in English worth reading." He was right. What he actually said was that, given the quantity of novels available, a reader needs some sense of where the highest achievements lie if what is valuable in the rest is to be identified. To suggest the distinctive nature of the great in prose fiction, Leavis coined the phrase "the novel as dramatic poem"—dramatic because it gives a direct presentment of its themes, and poem because, in the nineteenth century, the essentially poetic uses of English are found elsewhere than in formal verse. Image and symbol, Leavis shows, are structuring devices in the novel too, and prose rhythm (understood as a flexible instrument) can be as intense a means of control as meter. Leavis's analyses of George Eliot, James, Conrad, Lawrence, and, later, Dickens—together with shorter pieces on Bunyan, Twain, Tolstoy, and Forster—constitute a genuinely original achievement. Henry James was the only notable precursor, and his preoccupation with technique restricted his perspective. Leavis, together with his wife, made the case for the great novelists' being concerned, not (or not only) with offering a "realistic" depiction of society, but also, through that depiction, with making a critique, a diagnostic analysis, of it. Thus Lawrence and Dickens descend from Blake in their exposure of the impersonal mechanisms with which modern "civilization" blights the spiritual health of the individual; thus James, like Jane Austen, has the wit to make of social comedy a vehicle for enquiring into individual integrity; thus Twain raises a local dialect to the status of poetry, and through the persona of the uneducated states the potential of any sensitive being for fineness of soul.

In 1962 Leavis achieved his most spectacular, and unwelcome, bout of publicity in his lecture on C. P. Snow—a reply to Snow's own lecture of 1959, "The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution," which had deplored the ignorance of science shown by "literary intellectuals," dubbed "Luddites" and accused of willfully obstructing technological, and therefore social, progress:

> They still like to pretend that the traditional culture is the whole of "culture," as though the natural order didn't exist. As though the exploration of the natural order was of no interest either in its own value or its consequences. As though the scientific edifice of the physical world was not, in its intellectual depth, complexity, and articulation, the most beautiful and wonderful collective work of the mind of man.

Leavis's reply was so scathing that the publishers were advised it contained libelous statements. They sent the text to Snow who, to his eternal credit, insisted that it "must be printed exactly as it stood." When it appeared, Leavis was magisterially rebuked for rudeness by George Steiner and Lionel Trilling, and even had to suffer a would-be lethal put-down from Edith Sitwell—"Dr. Leavis only hates Charles because he is famous and writes good English!" The outrage centered on Leavis's dismissal of Snow's claims to be taken seriously as a novelist—which he was right in saying are non-existent. What was ignored was his wider contention that Snow was naïve to lament the "divide" between what he perceived as two cultures when, in

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fact, "there is only one culture," of which science is a part as much as literature. Dr. MacKillop makes a useful distinction between the language *of* science and discourse *about* science: "The discourses of and about literature need not be inherently alien to the discourse of individuals; discourse about science need not be alien either; but the discourse *of* science certainly is." Leavis was not setting himself up as an enemy of scientific research; how could he, knowing he had no training which would give him the right to comment? What he said was that science, like every other branch of intellectual activity, is an enquiry by the human mind, not by some impersonal ("collective" to use Snow's word) entity external to, or absolved from, human procedures and responsibilities. Nor did Leavis expect that literary critics could meet scientists on their own terms. He *did* expect a critic to be able to address intelligently the human consequences of scientific discovery; and he could point to Blake and, again, Dickens as creative writers who had done so.

Puzzlingly, Leavis did not cite the essay on Snow by the physical chemist and philosopher Michael Polanyi, which he must have known. Here is authoritative support from a qualified scientist:

> If I yet agree that there is a gap, and a dangerous gap, between science and the rest of our culture, it is not such deficiencies as the ignorance of thermodynamics shown by literary people, mentioned by Charles Snow, that I have in mind. Even mature scientists know little more than the names of most branches of science. This is inherent in the division of labour on which the progress of modern science is based, and which is likewise indispensable to the advancement of all our modern culture. . . . To do away with the specialization of knowledge would be to produce a race of quiz winners and destroy our culture in favour of a universal dilettantism. . . . The mechanistic explanation of the universe is a meaningless ideal. . . . The prediction of all atomic positions in the universe would not answer any question of interest to anybody.

From 1962 onward much of Leavis's effort went into applying this perception which he shared with Polanyi, that what is threatened in a world dominated by technology (and the world of the 1960s was barely affected by it compared to ours) is the belief in the irreducibility of the individual human being. As Leavis says:

> Science is obviously of great importance to mankind; it's of great cultural importance. But to say that is to make a value-judgement—a human judgement of value. The criteria of judgements of value and importance are determined by a sense of human nature and human need, and can't be arrived at by science itself; they aren't, and can't be, a product of scientific method, or anything like it. They are an expression of human responsibility.

So, when assured by an ingenuous philosophy don that "a computer can write a poem," Leavis replied that that was something he *knew* to be impossible. So it is, and the "analogy" between the human brain and the computer (which depends upon the mistaken equation of "brain" with "mind") is one of the most insidiously misleading examples of modern sophistry.

Dr. MacKillop is right to stress that, ultimately, Leavis and Snow were engaged in "a conflict over history." I mentioned earlier that Leavis is often derided for being nostalgic or sentimental about a past "organic society" to which he allegedly wanted everyone to return. As a former History scholar, and survivor of the Somme, Leavis is the last person in danger of glamorizing the past. Snow equated history with progress: Leavis knew that it was more complex than that. He could point to literature as evidence that a seismic change in society and social relations had occurred, beginning in the mid-seventeenth century, accelerated by the industrial revolution, and making (literally) a quantum leap in our own time; but when he did so it was not to hanker after old certainties but to assert the irrevocableness of what had gone.

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> We can't restore the general day-to-day creativity that has vanished; we shall have no successor to Dickens. But we *have* Dickens, and we have the English literature that (a profoundly significant truth) Dickens himself had, and more—for there is the later development that includes Lawrence. There *is* English literature—so very much more than an aggregation or succession of individual works and authors. It reveals for the contemplation it challenges—in its organic interrelatedness reveals incomparably—the nature of a cultural continuity, being such a continuity itself.

(We see here that, however scathing he may have been about Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Leavis did owe it a debt.)

In his final trilogy of books, *Nor Shall My Sword*, *The Living Principle*, and *Thought, Words, and Creativity*, Leavis, astonishingly for a man in his eighties, broke new ground, taking up a long-gone discussion with René Wellek. In his classic essay "Literary Criticism and Philosophy" (1937, reprinted in *The Common Pursuit*) Leavis had addressed Wellek's objection that he did not make explicit the theoretical bases of his criticism. His answer was simple: he couldn't; he wasn't a philosopher, and his premises were found only as his work exemplified them. But he added, "There is, I hope, a chance that I may in this way have advanced the theory, even if I haven't done the theorising"; and in *Education and the University* he had been rash enough to call *Burnt Norton* "the equivalent in poetry of a philosophical work" doing "by strictly poetical means the business of an epistemological and metaphysical inquiry." He can't have been satisfied with the equivocal nature of this comment, and in the 1970s found himself confronted by trendy dons recommending Wittgenstein to literary students, and by an apparent merger between literary criticism and linguistics (the first British flirtation with structuralism). Leavis, whose uneasy relationship with Wittgenstein is recorded in one of his finest essays,[3] sought for something which would be of genuine use at the undergraduate level in equipping students philosophically—for he couldn't believe Wittgenstein would be profitable—and found Michael Polanyi's essays *Knowing and Being*, edited by Marjorie Grene, which, with Polanyi's major treatise *Personal Knowledge* and Grene's own book *The Knower and the Known*, became essential reference points to him. They helped him to his final verdict on Eliot, the hundred-page commentary on *Four Quartets* in *The Living Principle*, and to his final statement of why Eliot was a lesser writer than Lawrence.

Grene and Polanyi mounted an attack upon Cartesian dualism. My mind, they insisted, is the mind of my body, and my body is the body of my mind. I as a person am my-mind-and-my-body, all five words receiving equal stress. All being, therefore, is indwelling—both *in* the body, tacitly, and focally *through* it to the external world ("external" *faute de mieux*—since my experience of the world must be interiorized before it is truly mine). "Life" exists, consequently, only in individual lives, and can't be aggregated, quantified, or reduced to statistics in Gradgrind fashion. All thinking is done by individual minds, but also collaboratively (*not* collectively) in the human world; and language—also the collaborative creation of human minds—is the medium of *all* thought. In Polanyi's words, "An exact mathematical theory means nothing unless we recognize an inexact non-mathematical knowledge on which it bears and a person whose judgement upholds this bearing."

This chimed in with problems Leavis had been pondering for years, notably the nature of judgment. "A judgement is personal, or it is nothing": but it also aspires to be more than personal, to have probative force, albeit in a non-scientific way. Where did judgment stand, epistemologically? Where, indeed, did literature stand? Already, in his reply to Snow, Leavis had begun to speak of "the Third Realm"—

3 "Memories of Wittgenstein" (1973), reprinted in *The Critic as Anti-Philosopher*, edited by G. Singh (University of Georgia Press, 1983).

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> that which is neither merely private and personal nor public in the sense that it can be brought into the laboratory or pointed to. You cannot point to the poem; it is "there" only in the re-creative response of individual minds to the black marks on the page. But—a necessary faith—it is something in which minds can meet.

Critical discussion becomes a paradigm of this re-creation, collaborative and creative: and English literature as an organic whole, like the individual works which compose it,

> can have its life only in the living present, in the creative response of individuals, who collaboratively renew and perpetuate what they participate in—a cultural community or consciousness.

Text, body of texts, the university department teaching them—all, analogically, are inhabitants of the Third Realm, "to which all that makes us human belongs."[4]

In his last two books Leavis presented creative works, those of Eliot and Lawrence above all, as, heuristically, achievements of "thought," of a non-mathematical, anti-philosophical kind (that is, not *opposed*, but *antithetical*, to philosophy). Lawrence's is the greater triumph because, unlike Eliot, he accepted the spirit of anti-Cartesianism, living in and through the body. Eliot's conception of Christianity led him to fear and, in crucial ways, deny the body, setting the spirit over and against it; his paradoxical—and self-contradicting—denial of the value of "merely" human creativity stems from the same feelings. When he writes in *The Dry Salvages*, "The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation," he hardly knows what he is affirming: for if the Incarnation means anything it means that physical matter is redeemed, or at least redeemable. It was Lawrence, not Eliot, however, who saw this most clearly.

Leavis consistently denied that he was contributing to philosophy, but it is hard to see how this last stage of his work falls outside that category—without at any time ceasing to be literary criticism. His discomfort with Wittgenstein, and his professional dislike of seeming to slight the specialist skills of a fellow-academic in another discipline, may have made him excessively cautious. Then, too, one wonders if he in some sense saw Wittgenstein as the equivalent in philosophy of himself in criticism. The teaching of both was overheard monologue in effect, and some of Wittgenstein's personal traits as evoked by Leavis (his "disinterested regardlessness," for instance, which could manifest itself as "a disconcerting lack of consideration," or his innocence which was often mistaken for cruelty) sound almost autobiographical. Wittgenstein wrote in *Culture and Value*:

> A teacher may get good, even astounding, results from his pupils while he is teaching them and yet not be a good teacher; because it may be that, while his pupils are directly under his influence, he raises them to a height which is not natural to them, without fostering their own capacities for work at this level, so that they immediately decline again as soon as the teacher leaves the classroom.

He is, I suspect, thinking of himself here; at times, reading the passage, I think of Leavis too. In the nature of things, Leavis's experiences, like his judgments, couldn't be lived through by anyone else; and although there are distinguished pupils of his in many walks of academic life—the art historian Michael Baxandall, or the philosopher and musicologist Michael Tanner—he cannot really be said to have left any successors. His life's work was "what was done, not to be done again."

4 Some commentators have sought to make connections between Leavis's Third Realm and Karl Popper's World 3, as expounded in Popper's *Objective Knowledge* (Clarendon Press, 1972)—indeed Popper himself endorses this position. Leavis however denied any influence, and reflection will show that the apparent similarities are superficial.

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Why, in conclusion, does Leavis matter? I propose the following theses, baldly stated: (1) He changed the way we read—poetry especially, but also the novel—not by pontificating about hermeneutics but by leaving an array of brilliant readings of particular works, readings which are not hermetic "practical criticism" exercises (a term he disliked—"practical criticism is criticism in practice"). No critic before Leavis had paid such close attention to words and their connections with ideas. (Perhaps Coleridge comes closest, but his brilliance was undisciplined.); (2) He provides a shining example of the way a mind can teach itself to develop. He emancipated himself from the influence of Eliot and, after fifty years, furnished the drastic limiting critique which "placed" his former mentor, in the process doing innovative work on the nature of thought and language; (3) He virtually invented (in conjunction with Mrs. Leavis) the criticism of the novel and the subject of cultural studies; (4) In his debates with the Marxists in the 1930s and with Snow and others in the 1960s, he vindicated the autonomy and dignity of literature as an activity of humanity which gives a vital context to *all* thinking, including the scientific and mathematical; (5) His conception of the university—the boldest since Newman's—although now rendered unrealizable by the degeneration of universities into business corporations, stands as a reminder of what higher education could be, and a rebuke to the reality; (6) In keeping *Scrutiny* going for twenty years, he made possible the publication of major work on English literature from Chaucer to the present day, plus French and German literature, philosophy, sociology, music, history, education, and politics; (7) His conception of the Third Realm, and his use of Grene and Polanyi, enabled him to make original and fruitful connections between literary criticism and philosophy, and contributed to the anti-Cartesian reassertion of the integrity of the individual human being; (8) All these are general points. They take no account of his work on individual authors: Arnold, Blake, Coleridge, George Eliot, T. S. Eliot, Hardy, Hopkins, James, Johnson, Lawrence, Marvell, Milton, Pope, Twain, and Wordsworth, to name the most obvious.

For what other critic this century can equal claims be made? To those who deny that Leavis matters, or that his importance is historical merely, all one can do is point to the evidence and ask the question.

In a sense, however, he *has* a historical importance, hinted at in my title—he is "the last critic," the last to have a coherent understanding of what literature and criticism were, the last to have the intellectual equipment to fulfill the critic's function. If he was the product of a particular historical moment, which has now passed with him, his greatness in meeting its challenges seems only more marked now: and if criticism as he understood it has ceased to exist, so much the worse for criticism—and literature. What is written by most university teachers of "English" now answers to no conception of criticism that Leavis would recognize: and those teachers' pupils are their successors. The future for the causes that Leavis gave his life to is unfathomably dark. When I listened to him in 1972, I was already aware that my own university teachers were, on the whole, a mediocre bunch; but I had no inkling of what now seems to me absolutely certain: that, however poorly served it was, my generation was the last which had the privilege of receiving an education at university at all.

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"Mighty poets"
by Donald Hall

When I asked Wallace
Stevens permission to reprint poems
he published in the *Advocate*,
he acceded with a note
that set me thinking: "Some
of one's early things give one the creeps."

Later I went up to him
at a brunch before The Game, where
he stood with friends
from Hartford Accident and Indemnity.
I deferred to the poet;
the businessman blushed and muttered.
I asked if he could stay
in town through Monday; the *Advocate*
was giving a party
for Mr. Eliot—"or maybe
for you both?" "Shit," he said,
"fuck. Got to get back to the office."

*

Mr. Eliot at
sixty-three—Nobel Laureate and Czar—
kindly suggested
that I drop by his office at Faber's
in London on my way
to Oxford. In dazed preparation,
I daydreamed agendas
for our conversation. At his desk,
the old poet spoke

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quietly of "the poetic drama,"
and "our literary
generations," as if I had one.
After an hour, he scraped
his chair back. I leapt up, and he leaned
in the doorway
to improvise a parting word. "Let me see,"
he said. "Forty years
ago I went from Harvard to Oxford,
now you from Harvard
to Oxford. What advice may I give you?"
He paused the exact
comedian's millisecond as I
reflected on the moment,
and then with his lilting
English melody inquired:
"Have you any long underwear?"

*

Thomas was thirty-eight,
rumpled and fat, when I slept over
at the Boat House after
swilling through Laugharne's pubs. As we sat
drinking one last
Whitbread's, I changed the subject to poetry.
It was clear that his poems
depressed him. He knew what he'd done,
what he hadn't done,
and that he was done for. As I chatted
about critics,
I laughed at someone who pontificated
in a quarterly about
"The Death Wish in Dylan Thomas."
Young and careless, I asked,
"Who wants to die?" Behind his heavy
lids, Dylan said that *he* did.
"Why?" I asked him. "Oh, for the *change*."

*

Edwin and Willa Muir
translated Kafka, working in Prague
for the British Council.

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Edwin reviewed novels for the *Times*,
    did talks for the BBC,
and advised a small publisher.
    They lived by their wits
as Edwin made poems. When I met them,
    they were sixty-odd,
tender and generous. I asked Willa
    how it was to be old
and she said it was "surprisingly
  good . . . except that one
will need to close the eyes of the other."

*

    I had taught for six months
when Robert Graves came to Ann Arbor.
    "The name is Robert,"
he told me at the Union when I tried
    formal address.
Ashamed to be a professor, I told him
    I envied the way
he wrote prose for a living. He asked me,
    "Have you ever *tried*?"
As we finished our coffee and ice cream
    in the ratty student
cellar, I asked, "But how do you write
  so much?" Graves published
three books a year—poems, novels, pieces
    for *Punch*, crank
anthropology—while I dozed through my twenties.
    Robert Graves never lacked
an answer: "The twenty-minute nap."
    When I protested,
he repeated, "The twenty-minute nap."

*

    After dinner at Crispi's
We drove around Rome. "There's the *scene*—
    of the *crime*," he said
as we passed a building, in the accent
    or melody that sounded
like W. C. Fields. "Where you broadcast
    the talks?" "Where I *gave* 'em—
the *scripts*." When he couldn't remember

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the way to Hadrian's
Tomb, he sank back in a diffident woe.
But when, with his yellow
Confucian scarf slung on his shoulders,
he bought gelati
and we strolled a piazza together,
old Ezra Pound cocked
his lionish head like a gallantman
captain of mercenaries
hired by Sforza.
Answering
my knock the first day
I arrived from Thaxted, he addressed me
in small bursts like sporadic
gunfire: "Mr. Hall—you have *come*
—all the *way*—from *England*—
and you *find* me—nothing but *fragments*."

*

At his last Ann Arbor
reading—at the age of eighty-eight,
months before he died—Robert
Frost nodded, smiled, waved, and trembled
while two thousand people
stood applauding. Drinking Seven-Up
afterward, he told us
Ezra Pound was effeminate,
Yeats talked bunkum,
and Roethke was jealous of other poets.
When he shuffled
from greenroom to limo, a crowd of students
gathered to catch
sight of him. He V'd his arms like Eisenhower
and told them, "Remember me."
In the back of the Cadillac,
Frost shook his head:
"To think that I wanted only to *lodge* four
lines somewhere, to *stick* . . . !"
While I watched, his face—full of victory—
reversed suddenly
to guilty sorrow: "But we were so poor."

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Theater

Relearning the old lessons

by Mark Steyn

Exclamation marks! I have of late been brooding on them! Every Sunday, *The New York Times* is full of them! For example, the advertisement for Philip Barry's *Holiday* at Circle in the Square:

> Youthful, vigorous, good-looking. Tony Goldwyn is funny and elegant. The beautiful Laura Linney is his equal!
> —Vincent Canby, *The New York Times*

The beautiful Laura Linney didn't rate an exclamation mark in Canby's review. It's actually very difficult to sneak an exclamation mark into the columns of the *Times*. As press agents will testify, the paper is merciless in defending its critical integrity against the hucksters of Broadway: you're not allowed, say, to quote Canby's more genial comments from WQXR or WQEW, the *Times* radio stations, and bill them as the views of "Canby of the *Times*." Yet they're happy to indulge advertising copy which riddles his shafts with exclamation marks. Perhaps they feel the practice is so desperate as to be self-evident. Perhaps they amuse themselves by playing spot-the-least-deservedly-exclamation-peppered-quote: "The choreography is derivative and the lyrics serviceable! Together they make for an insipid evening!" But, in truth, hardly any of the copy merits exclamation marks. It's sham excitement, which, in its way, is the defining condition of our drama. Driving home from the theater the other night, I caught some talk-radio Love Doc discussing the phenomenon of the phantom ejaculation. That's where (if I understand correctly) the man thinks he has reached the point of climax, and, while from his point of view everything has gone off with textbook precision, nothing has actually happened. Doctor Judy or Jodie or Josie recommended that the woman should be gracious enough to pretend that she was fully satisfied. This, it seems to me, is an almost frighteningly accurate diagnosis of the relationship between play and audience at *Holiday*. The show and the press ads are full of phantom ejaculations, and we're too polite to point out that it's not the real thing.

This season, Circle in the Square is having a difficult time squaring the circle financially, and it's already had to cancel its next production, a revival of *The Petrified Forest*. We're meant to deplore this situation, though it's hard to see why. Most of its recent revivals have been simply not good enough: it's impossible to engage with them as drama, only as ritual. *Holiday* is the story of Johnny Case (Tony Goldwyn) who falls in love with Julia Seton (Kim Raver) at Lake Placid and falls out with her placid, old-moneyed family when it emerges that, having made a very modest pile, he intends to spend his young adulthood enjoying it and leave work until old age. It's a favorite set-up of inter-war dramas: the insiders versus the outsider, who's almost always a tiresome young man. The play was first seen a few months before

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the Wall Street crash of 1929, and, although a modified version of its world still exists, to judge from the press coverage our idea of dynastic muscle these days is Tony Goldwyn, grandson of Sam. The point is that, in order to appreciate the pressures on an outsider, we have to understand the world he's outside of. David Warren's production fails signally to conjure this world for us. You could pick any number of small, cumulative deficiencies: for instance, despite the services of a "Style/Movement" supervisor, the servants don't walk right. But the biggest flaw is a basic structural one: Warren has chosen to play the piece in its original three acts, with two full intermissions. In 1928, a Broadway audience would have picked up on the nuances of Act I, the clues, the premonitions of trouble to come. At seventy years' remove, it's little more than a perfunctory first scene with some fellows in morning dress swanning about in a room with a lot of luxuriously upholstered armchairs. Intermissions to plays are like exclamation marks to press ads: you have to earn them. Otherwise, off we go for fifteen minutes and we don't talk about the show, because the show hasn't given us anything to talk about. So we get yakking about this and that instead, and next thing you know, the second act's reduced to little more than an intermission between the intermissions. In the West End, two intermissions would be a chance for the theater owners to clean up in bar sales. But a much smaller proportion of New York audiences heads for the bar and, when they do, it's usually just for a soda: it's difficult, seeing the fastidiousness with which playgoers eschew alcohol, to avoid the conclusion that they see the theater as some sort of penance or endurance test. So we must look for other reasons as to why Warren felt the need for two fifteen-minute interruptions, and the only one left is that he needed the time to lower his second-act set into position.

In place of Act I's drawing room, we now have a disused children's playroom. The sets are detailed and representational, which audiences like. But there's little use in a representational set when the drama's being played in the round, as here. When I arrived at Circle in the Square, having carefully selected my eighth-row two-on-the-aisle, I found the usherette had given them to a couple of cranky matinee ladies who'd jibbed at being seated in the front row. I'm not surprised. If I'd wanted to be that close, I'd have auditioned. And that's the nub of the matter. Derek McLane's representational set would make sense on a proscenium stage, but not here: you're not looking at a 1928 drawing room, you're looking at a 1928 drawing room on the other side of which there's a guy with an anorak and a fat girl in an "I ♥ NY" T-shirt and an old boy with his eyes closed, breathing heavily, and a woman whispering to her neighbor . . . You can't use the furniture to create 1928, you have to do it dramatically. But everything about this production has been gone at backwards: instead of finding the play's organic style, Warren thought he could do it with design style, which meant he needed two intermissions, which meant we, as an audience, never have a chance to lose ourselves in the drama.

Cats and *Starlight Express* get worse press, but a production like this is far more harmful. Circle in the Square limps on only because of an unspoken collusion between both parties—players and audience. It comes into peculiar focus up the street at Lincoln Center's Vivian Beaumont Theater in David Hare's *Racing Demon*. This is a play to flatter audiences with their high-mindedness: it's an "issue play," about the role of the church—except that, as it's the Church of England, you needn't fret about it *that* much. Indeed, as the play proceeds and Hare scrambles to cram in all his research notes, you suddenly realize that, whatever the defects in the piece, the playwright has quite unwittingly hit on a splendid metaphor for today's theater. Faced with dwindling, aging, middle-class congregations, the Church of England has embraced every modish cause going—the inner cities, homosexuality, women priests—only to

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find that its congregations are still those dwindling, aging middle-classes for whom churchgoing retains a residual social cachet. They don't mind the wishy-washy socialism and the hippy-dippy hymns and the gay-outreach sermons, because the church is now so remote they don't even connect it with the real world. Besides, even if they still believed in anything, the priests lack the conviction to fire that belief in others. Now doesn't that sound like an evening at today's well-mannered, well-meaning theater? As one character, the Bishop of Southwark, remarks: priests have only one duty—to put on a good show. Both bishop and playwright use the phrase in its cynical, contemporary devalued sense—an act of sleight-of-hand, a way of passing the time, the art of getting away with it.

Doctor Jakki or Joni or Jeannie was vague on the issue of whether phantom ejaculation is a sign of impotence, but, in the theater, it seems a reasonable assumption. In America, we have the most sophisticated selling of drama in the world, yet we sell everything *but* the drama. To cite the obvious, look at *Les Misérables*. With canny timing, this British musical sneaked under the Iron Curtain just in time for Communism's death throes: in Budapest, it was seen as a parable of the '56 uprising; in Gdynia, Poland, the little urchin girl's tattered tricolor was replaced by the Solidarity flag and became a call to arms. And in New York? It's a merchandising opportunity. As the satirical revue *Forbidden Broadway* puts it:

> Come see us grovel in the dirt,
> Then buy a souvenir and don it;
> Rich folks pay 40 bucks a shirt
> That has a starving pauper on it.

Clearly, there's more to it than that: New York audiences are moved by *Les Miz*. But they don't feel it speaks to their own lives: the grimy sewer dwellers they've just cheered onstage are the types they'd least like to run into on the way back to the parking lot. Audiences know with whom they're supposed to identify and, because that identification is assumed, it's meaningless. Nowhere is that more transparent than when it comes to that festering sore in the body politic, the issue of race.

Whites, we're told, were shocked by the O.J. verdict. But what shocked them more was the black reaction to it: all that whoopin' and a-hollerin', all those high-fives horrified whitey because it was such an *unseemly* response to a double-murder trial. Yet these are precisely the gestures that whites have been conditioned to applaud in the theater for years. Go to any old Broadway revue and you notice that the black cast members, particularly the fat female ones, always get louder cheers than the white ones. There was a good example on TV the other week, when Tony Bennett was duetting with various female vocalists. For some reason, Bennett gave Patti LaBelle half of "I Got Rhythm." By the time she'd bulldozed her way through it, Ira Gershwin's lyric was a heap of rubble. Patti shrieks and ululates and is queen of today's melisma junkies—that's to say, she takes a perfectly good monosyllable and elongates it to six ("lu-u-u-u-u-urve") as if soulfulness were measured by the yard. Yet, as at *Smokey Joe's Café* or *Swingin' on a Star*, this crass travesty prompted delirious applause, and left the skinny white chick who came next with an impossible act to follow. White middle-class audiences take it for granted that black renditions are by definition more *felt*. Is this liberal guilt? Or an easy gesture? The O.J. aftermath was interesting because, seeping through the standard media wishful thinking was an awkward truth: a lot of whites are uncomfortable with the vocabulary of black culture.

This is a proper subject for theater, but it would require a theater that dealt not in black-and-white and primary colors but in the dark, indeterminate shades of human nature. And we've forgotten how to do that. The new hit at the Public Theater, *Bring In 'Da Noise/Bring In 'Da Funk*, sounds like a parody of black affirmation.

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The title reminded me of a guy I often think of as the archetypal Oprah guest: he was a psychologist and he turned up for her special on the L.A. riots to plug his book, *Why Black People Tend to Shout*. (I forget the reason.) Directed by George C. Wolfe, with choreography by Savion Glover and rap poetry by Reg E. Gaines, *Bring In 'Da Noise* is a "celebration" of black rhythms from tap to hip-hop. "Celebration" is a soft option for theater: it excuses you from making drama. Thus, this show virtually dictates its own reviews: as Glover dances, we hear his voice-over say, "It's raw, it's rhythms, it's us, it's ours." And, obligingly, the critics comment approvingly on its "raw" energy; also, it's in-yo'-face, strut-yo'-stuff, and sundry other robust colloquialisms your average honky reviewer doesn't get much of a chance to use when he's discussing Ibsen. There are moments of rare beauty and savage cruelty in this show, but they can't disguise the fact that the frame, the architecture, is the theatrical equivalent of an affirmative-action program. You might as well hang a sign on the door saying: "Normal critical faculties have been suspended."

There's a character in the piece called Uncle Huck-A-Buck, a caricature of Bill "Bojangles" Robinson who prances around with a Shirley Temple doll and smirks:

> Who de hell cares if I acts de fool,
> When I takes a swim in my swimming pool?

Sixty years on, Robinson's a soft target. But don't shows like this, supposedly so "positive," create their own far more limiting stereotypes? All this raw, earthy, noisy funk talk: surely it's as patronizing as Adelaide Hall doing "Diga Diga Doo" in a few bananas and feathers in *Blackbirds of 1928*? The idea that blacks have a uniquely authentic purchase on vernacular culture is absurd and restrictive. If you think my notion of theatrical affirmative action is a mere rhetorical flourish, consider this: raw, earthy *white* culture is absolutely invisible on the New York stage. Country music is the poor white's answer to the black man's jazz, but there are no proud, affirmative celebrations of it at the Public Theater. It's fine and dandy if you're the sort of stump-toothed, inbred Appalachian mountain man who likes nothing better than a jigger of moonshine and a bunk-up with his sister, but it's regarded as unworthy of notice by any of the more serious forms.

Listen, I don't even like talking about theater or music or dance in this way. Most blacks are lousy tap dancers, just like most whites are. But this idea that black culture is an artistic channelling of black oppression, black rage, black fury, the authentic voice of the streets, etc., is madness. That way lies Snoop Doggy Dogg and Niggaz With Attitude. Black culture is nothing to do with primal jungle energy: that's just a P.C. version of minstrelsy. Black culture is Scott Joplin, Louis Armstrong, Andy Razaf, Duke Ellington, Nat "King" Cole: black people who tend *not* to shout. Pigeonholed by well-meaning white audiences, black culture is degenerating into glib mannerisms: Patti LaBelle's melismas, the high fives, the "Yo! My Man!"s . . .

And what's the special generosity extended to black culture done for the wider cause? At the end of Wolfe's evening, Glover and his fellow dancers tap downstage and try to hail a cab. None will stop, and, in a final burst of fury, they unleash a ferocious machine-gun rat-a-tat tap and flip the last cabby the finger. The predominantly white audience was most taken by this, but by the time they'd hit the sidewalk the image had become fuzzy, abstract, remote. Or would you fancy Glover's chances if he'd changed into his street clothes and tried to hitch a ride home from one of his customers?

Incidentally, in that finale, one of the dancers, signaling to the yellow cabs that he's no hoodlum or crack dealer, waves a copy of Colin Powell's *American Journey*. It gets a laugh, but it's a depressing moment because it underlines the awkwardness of any African-American who declines to be defined by "noise" and "funk." For me, the

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most endearing moment of the General's non-candidacy was when he announced that his favorite music was Andrew Lloyd Webber. No wonder Jesse Jackson began to wonder whether the guy was even black.

For the most sublime fusion of white guilt and black paranoia, however, we're unlikely to see anything to better Robert Alexander's *I Ain't Yo' Uncle: The New Jack Revisionist Uncle Tom's Cabin*, directed by Reggie Montgomery at Connecticut's Hartford Stage, a stone's throw (so to speak) from Harriet Beecher Stowe's old home. The show's line is a simple one, spelled out in the playbill: "Even as Stowe's novel advanced the cause of abolition, it calcified the image of black people for white Americans." It's a familiar argument, but it teeters on the brink of saying that all white actions are by definition racist—Mrs. Stowe's as much as Simon Legree's—and, if that's the case, if white racism is as much a given as black skin color, then what's left to discuss? This is one of those shows that play better in the accompanying background notes than onstage.

Alexander's conceit is to let the black characters wrest their fates away from the author's control. The whites, meanwhile, are played as stock figures from nineteenth-century melodrama, full of exaggerated gestures and mawkish sentimentality. But you have to be really good to act bad, and this company isn't. And, as the evening proceeds, Alexander seems to have increasing difficulty keeping his sights focused. So Uncle Tom winds up doing a parody of "Ol' Man River," though, if you don't understand the disciplines to which Kern and Hammerstein subscribed, you're unlikely to pull it off:

> In this wo-orld
> You make your lu-uck . . .

Melismas again. You wouldn't get those lines from Hammerstein.

Topsy, played by Michele Morgan, has an easier task. She comes on breakdancin' and rappin' and, recognizing the Patti LaBelle moment, we cheer her to the rafters. A honky tries breakdancin' and, naturally, he ain't got rhythm. Topsy puts a voodoo spell on Eva and kills her. The most famous death scene in nineteenth-century drama is played for laughs: "Now," says Tom, "I hear you folks out there choking back your tears . . ." How we hoot! "And I hear you bloods saying 'Drop the bitch! . . .' " More yuks. "Fuck God!" says George. More laughs. "Blasphemy, George?" says a shocked, wide-eyed Miss Ophelia. And yet more laughs! George transforms himself into a Black Panther; Simon Legree joins the LAPD, and Topsy roars "Fuck you!" at us. I counted four blacks in the auditorium, five if you include the usherette. But, otherwise, we middle-class whites had a high old time, knowing that it was all utterly, delightfully . . . harmless.

"This isn't about you anymore," George tells Harriet. "It's about us." But no, it isn't. Because they, "us," have ceased to exist. Instead of stereotypes, we have slogans; instead of characters, postures. How easy this New Jack Revisionism is. Back in 1852, George C. Howard of Purdy's National Theatre entrusted the adaptation of the novel to his juvenile, George Aiken. He was an actor, with no great education, but he understood the power of the story. The first production of his *Uncle Tom* opened in Troy, New York, was seen by most of the town's 30,000 people and played an unprecedented run of 100 performances. Per capita, that was equivalent to a seven-year run in New York. When it did hit the big town, in the middle of a heat wave, it was a sensation. The selective quotations Alexander uses in his background notes include *The New York Herald*'s anti-abolitionist column, but not the review in the *Times*, which, noting the story's effect on the Bowery ragamuffins, observed that henceforth the authorities would get little help from those boys in their pursuit of runaway slaves. Like Alexander's version, the play got laughs. But, unlike Alexander, Aiken was sure enough of his subject to take us beyond laughs. "The accent, a broad and guttural

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Negro accent, but the voice deep and earnest," wrote the *Times* man of Uncle Tom, "so earnest that the first laugh at his Nigger words, from the pit, died away into deep stillness."

There are no moments of equivalent power in *I Ain't Yo' Uncle*. Purdey's National Theatre took Mrs. Stowe's argument to what was then a Democratic, anti-abolitionist stronghold. They made their case, and they changed their audience's minds. Aiken's was the first play to be presented on Broadway as an evening in itself, without the need for an afterpiece or any supporting entertainment. As Mrs. Stowe remarks proudly here, "My book caused the Civil War." You don't have to accept that unreservedly to be impressed by the statistics: in 1879, there were forty-nine companies of *Uncle Tom* on the road; half a century later, there were still a dozen touring. Alexander points out that not until 1876 did a black man play Uncle Tom and then it was just as a box-office gimmick—like David Merrick's all-black *Hello, Dolly!* But that very first production in Troy, in the face of powerful opposition from local churches, broke new ground. Aiken, assuming that no white woman would black up for Topsy, had intended to make her a boy. It was the manager, Howard, who persuaded his wife, Cordelia, to take the role. It's not what we'd call progress now. But, in those days, it was considered degrading for white ladies to have anything to do with any aspect of Negro culture. Cordie Howard's burnt cork put an end to that.

Alexander might dispute the value of that, but not the impact. That's why *I Ain't Yo' Uncle* is such a futile exercise. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is the single most influential play in American theater history. Unlike *Bring In 'Da Noise*, it invited us to look beyond skin color, to see Tom and Topsy and George and company as individuals. If they became stereotypes of the Negro, if they led to shif'less coons and electric-haired pickaninnies and the nobility of suffering embodied in "Ol' Man River" and "That's Why Darkies Were Born," then that's our problem, not Mrs. Stowe's: she gave us the first human, adult stereotypes of Negroes in an age when they were stereotyped as animals or simpletons. For any "issue play," that's a staggering accomplishment, and one that was far more uncomfortable for its white audience than the old refrain about jungle rhythms that *I Ain't Yo' Uncle* and *Bring In 'Da Noise* are content to peddle. That's a trivial *reductio* of the range of black experience: to quote Fats Waller, your feet's *too* big. But our theater is a ghetto of the mind: instead of reaching beyond, it finds it more comforting to tell like-minded people things they already know. We don't need New Jack Revisionism, we need to relearn the old lessons. Bring in 'da noise? Bring in 'da bunk.

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Art

The pleasure trade: Howard Hodgkin at the Met

by Mario Naves

There are few brushstrokes in contemporary painting that announce themselves as impudently as those of Howard Hodgkin. Ranging from swirling swathes to patterned splotches, Hodgkin's brushstrokes are at once an homage to the act of painting and a tweaking of it. His splotch, a younger relative of the Pointillist dot, is gratifyingly childlike, and Hodgkin clearly delights in its obviousness. We know how these splotches are made—the artist presses his loaded brush onto the painting's surface, then lifts it—and we smile to imagine making them ourselves.

There is ample opportunity to view Hodgkin's brushwork in the fifty paintings included in the exhibition "Howard Hodgkin: Paintings 1975–1995." [1] Hodgkin is a British painter who has received international recognition and critical accolades, but who isn't exactly a known quantity to American audiences. A lot of people will be seeing his work for the first time at the Met and it will probably strike them as exotic. The crowds I attended the show with were positively buoyed by Hodgkin's paintings. How could they not be? Hodgkin's work is snazzy. His colors are brassy, and the theatricality of the work tends toward farce. While Hodgkin's paintings are abstract they retain enough representational clues to give the uninitiated a hook into the painting; when they don't, his chatty titles prod us into finding them. Hodgkin's cheeky updating of Intimism seems to offer that rarest of entities: contemporary art that trades in pleasure.

Yet Hodgkin's work is less an extension of Intimism than a cartoon of it. This isn't necessarily a bad thing. If only his best paintings have the pull of art, his whole *oeuvre* is genuinely engaging. The exhibition, however, confirms what a lot of us who have followed Hodgkin's work have suspected for some time: that he is an artist whose paintings are best appreciated one at a time. In her catalogue essay, Susan Sontag quotes the artist as saying, "My pictures tend to destroy each other when they are hung too closely together." He's right, but not for the reasons he thinks. Each of his paintings may have as its basis its own unique emotional and narrative impulses, but when seen in the company of fifty fellow-Hodgkins, the painting's uniqueness vanishes. Hodgkin is a great homogenizer. It's unlikely that anyone who leaves the ex-

1 "Howard Hodgkin: Paintings 1975–1995" opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, on November 2, 1995, and remains on view through January 28, 1996. The show will travel to the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth (March 31–July 14, 1996) and the Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, Düsseldorf (August 17–October 13, 1996). A catalogue, with essays by Michael Auping, John Elderfield, and Susan Sontag, has been published by the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth and Harry N. Abrams (216 pages, $39.95; $29.95 paper).

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hibit will do so without knowing what a "Hodgkin" looks like, but it's even more unlikely that they will carry with them the memory of any one specific painting.

Hodgkin's finest paintings come early in the exhibition, when the energy of an artist reaching maturity is apparent. *Grantchester Road* (1975) serves as a virtual blueprint for the work to come. In it, a figure obscured by a black brushstroke stands within an interior, which itself sits within a painted frame, complete with black and cream "curtains." With its architectonic structure and bracketed areas of splotches, *Grantchester Road* updates Vuillard in an appealingly punchy manner. It's as cute as Hodgkin wants it to be. (If we must have Pop Art, let it be as chummy as this.) Some may feel that its "recognizable" imagery—is that a painting by Jules Olitski?—lays out its intentions too blatantly. Yet in comparison to Hodgkin's later work, which becomes more abstract as his brushwork gains independence, *Grantchester Road* seems successful *because* of its spatial and figurative concreteness. Hodgkin needs representational markers and geometric scaffolding to focus his painting. Without them he descends into a sloppy mannerism.

Hodgkin's paintings are worked and reworked over long stretches of time—*Sad Flowers* (1979–85) alone took six years to complete—and so the surfaces can sometimes be knotty. They also can sometimes be arid; there's often an unattractive matte quality to his paint. (An artist friend attributes this to Hodgkin's use of Liquin, a painting medium that enhances the fluidity of oils but deadens their body and sheen.) Certainly the colors and brushwork are *there*, but not like they are in reproduction. In photos, the work sings: the surfaces become streamlined and the colors thrive. But this leaves the museum visitor deflated. Hodgkin has the queer distinction of being a painter whose work improves in reproduction.

Nevertheless, Hodgkin's brushwork does have the ability to delight, and it gathers strength the more it insists on the density of oil paint. In his more modestly scaled paintings, Hodgkin's marks exist within a space appropriate to the size of his brush. He relies on an intimate—an *Intimist*—scale to keep his splotches reigned in and his paintings knitted together. When Hodgkin increases the size of his paintings he lapses into self-parody. Hodgkin's brushstrokes have always come with quotation marks—he may be more of a postmodernist than we think—and their gentle irony plays well in small formats. When Hodgkin attempts to translate his painterly repertoire to larger paintings, his irony wears thin and fast. *When Did We Go to Morocco?* (1988–93), for instance, measures 77 ½ x 106 inches. Where once his painthandling inhabited the work, here it just fills up a lot of space, and Hodgkin flailing away with paint is not an easy thing to look at. He simply isn't capable of pulling off (or pulling together) a painting of this scale, and the increase in brush size serves only to exaggerate the affectation inherent in his painthandling.

The better part of Hodgkin's reputation rests on his gift as a colorist, and, to quote one museumgoer's exclamation, what "nice and bright" colors there are to be found in his paintings! Intense reds, blues, greens, and oranges jostle one another in the work. This is why his paintings hold the ground-floor galleries of the Lila Acheson Wallace wing so well: Hodgkin's colors shout for attention and get it. While Hodgkin employs a veritable rainbow, he doesn't give his colors much personality. They feel arbitrary and, I would guess, are straight from the tube. Certainly, there are colors that Hodgkin prefers—permanent green, for one—but we never think of them as "his" colors. We don't call to mind, oh, a Hodgkin orange the same way we do a Matisse blue or a Philip Guston pink. Hodgkin uses colors he likes, that's all. He isn't a colorist so much as he is a painter who uses a lot of color.

The curators neatly, if inadvertently, underscore this distinction by closing the exhibition with *After Morandi* (1989–94), a

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row of colored vertical stripes surrounded by a gray border. It might be said that Morandi was an artist who painted with no-color. Yet, this is precisely what makes Morandi a master and Hodgkin an enthusiast. The limited nature of Morandi's palette, and the subtle shifts in weight, light, and space he gleaned from it, let us know that he knew a thing or two about color. The mistake Hodgkin and his admirers make is believing that merely "pumping up the volume" necessarily constitutes using color well. There are times he gets away with it. *D. H. in Hollywood* (1980–84), a "portrait" of his friend David Hockney, has a glowing, bleached-out tonality that puts a stamp on Hodgkin's coloristic brashness, and there are other paintings here whose colors add up to something more than the sum of their parts. But mostly Hodgkin's colors bash into one another. The only thing that helps us in connecting *After Morandi* with its inspiration, after all, is the title.

The paintings do hold together compositionally, however, and Hodgkin gets them to do so through the device of the frame. *The Hopes at Home* (1973–77) is the first painting one sees upon entering the exhibition, and not just for reasons of chronology: it's there because it's one of Hodgkin's best. Here he orchestrates his greens, reds, and oranges by framing them with a wide blackish-green brushstroke. By wrapping the work, so to speak, Hodgkin forces the painting to cohere.

It should be reiterated that the frame of *The Hopes at Home* is made of paint and paint alone. When Hodgkin uses actual frames, often painting directly over them so that the painting itself overlaps onto it, it is the sheerest gimmickry and an annoyance. We are told that the frame reinforces each painting's status as an object, but that's just Conceptualist fiddle-faddle: an artist should be able to refer to a painting's physicality without resorting to trickery. The lateral layering of wide stretcher bars around the wooden panel at the center of *On the Riviera* (1987–88), for instance, is not only obtrusive, it's a stunt worthy of the most audacious graduate painting student. Hodgkin's frames don't enhance the painting; they impede it. And when he dabs orange splotches on an ornamental octagonal frame, as in *Keith and Kathy Sachs* (1988–91), Hodgkin doesn't flirt with kitsch, he is subsumed by it. The frame is a pictorial gimcrack a better artist wouldn't think twice about.

A lot of us, however, have thought twice about Hodgkin, and this is what makes "Paintings 1975–1995" such a frustrating affair. One senses that Hodgkin has (or had) the goods to be a more substantial painter than the one revealed here, and a dozen or so of these paintings do make the case convincingly. I loved *Patrick Caulfield in Italy* (1987–92) when I saw it at Knoedler & Company two years ago—and I still do, inverted frame and all. But the company it keeps here all but drains it of individuality, wit, and spunk. By the time one reaches the end of the exhibition, Hodgkin's cheekiness has become as chafing as Lucian Freud's misanthropy. There is no doubt that Hodgkin is a gifted artist with taste and a sense of tradition. But he is also one too comfortable within the confines of a formula. "Howard Hodgkin: Paintings 1975–1995" does him no favors.

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The media

Groupthink TV

by James Bowman

When Bill Clinton announced the signing of the Bosnian peace agreement in November, he said a curious thing. He said that the negotiators in Dayton had at last brought about an ending to the horrible things that "we had to watch night after night after night for four long years" on our television screens. Granted, he was trying to bring the thing home to people whose support he needed in order to play what he considered an essential part in effecting the peace. But this only suggests that he is not the only one whose first concern is for his own tender feelings. Probably for Clinton himself but certainly (in his own and his advisors' view) for those to whom he wished to appeal, the ending of bloody slaughter in Bosnia might or might not be a good thing for the Bosnians, but it was certainly a good thing for those in the distant and comfortable U. S. of A. who had grown weary of watching it over their suppers on television.

I had not thought that narcissism had undone so many. Yet such appalling indications of its progress go unnoticed in the press and the media because there the people are mostly sufferers themselves and see nothing unusual in the same affliction's visiting anyone else—not even the President of the United States. This must also be the reason why otherwise intelligent critics like Charles McGrath, whose opinions I discussed in this space last month, persist in treating television drama with so much more seriousness than it deserves. They do not recognize that watching television is a fundamentally different activity from reading a novel or watching a play. The genuinely aesthetic experience involves breaking, however briefly, the bonds of self, either through abstraction or through empathy. Television only reinforces those bonds.

It is easiest to see this process at work in the TV sitcom. People often speak of the way in which television programmers copy one another as if it were a regrettable lapse on the part of otherwise creative and interesting people. Dorothy Rabinowitz, for example, writing in *The Wall Street Journal*, complains that

> network programmers evidently continue to live in the illusion that shows created along exactly the same lines as last year's hit make for ratings riches. Under the circumstances, it's hard to see why the networks don't get together and simply form one large company—Groupthink Productions—that could deliver all these shows.

As so often in our modern popular culture, satire limps haltingly behind reality. In effect, Groupthink Productions is already in full operation because groupthink is of the very essence of television programming. When TV critics praise a particular producer's "originality" they are employing a relative term. The most original any TV show gets is just a little less imitative.

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That is because television entertainment is a branch of marketing rather than of art or literature or drama. Not only are the shows all alike, but they are all alike in particular ways. Look at the current sitcom vogue for yuppie urban singles with a nice line in wisecracks. The ghastly "Seinfeld" hit upon the formula a few years ago, and now it is not just most new shows but every new show that imitates "Seinfeld" or earlier generations of his imitators such as "Ellen" or "Friends." Pick two from the new crop at random, say NBC's "Caroline in the City" and Fox's "Crew." According to the critics, the former is supposed to be good and the latter bad, but it is pretty hard to tell much difference between them. Maybe "Caroline" has better one-liners. Its star, Lea Thompson, seems to be widely liked in the critical community and she provides a sympathetic focus that "Crew" lacks. But both shows are as full of clichés as they can well be.

Are we to believe that the people who watch them don't realize that they are clichés? Much more likely, I think, is that clichés are exactly what they want. Like most sitcoms, these depend on well-established types, rather than character development. It is important that each character be recognizable, which in practice means that his actions have to be all but completely predictable. In fact, it is more and more the case that the characters are only platforms for the launching of one-liners and double-entendres. All television these days aspires to the condition of stand-up comedy, which is the ultimate in passive, no-fault entertainment. Never have the "coms" been as "sit" as they are now. Not only are the characters within each series stock types, but they are more or less interchangeable between series. The gold standard of these stock types is the single woman in the city, who is smart, witty, unjustly afflicted with problems at work, and unlucky in love. She is sexually aggressive, especially in her habit of commenting on men's physical attributes in ways that would be offensive if the roles were reversed. Her comments are generally disparaging too, since the deflation of the male ego is widely appealing to the shows' target audience, which is women aged nineteen to thirty-five.

The young men around these women are naturally wimpy and feckless and the older ones exploitative and insensitive, since men are not the target audience and it flatters insecure young women to see the inadequacies of men portrayed as being responsible for the misfortunes of women. The theme goes back at least as far as "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" in the 1970s (Mary herself was back this season, editing a tabloid newspaper in the truly awful "New York News." Such entertainment is essentially marketing rather than art: you find out who the advertisers think is the most desirable audience and then you write something that will make that audience feel good, that will give them a vicarious pleasure in recognizing someone coping with the world as they like to imagine it. The true test of art, even bad art, is its universality. This stuff does not even come close.

Another example of the type is ABC's "The Naked Truth," featuring Tea Leoni as yet another single girl in the city. The gimmick in this show is that Nora, Miss Leoni's character, has just been divorced from a millionaire husband (Michael York) but has refused to take any alimony. As a result she takes a job as a photojournalist on a sleazy tabloid. Here she is forced to do lots of shameless and disgusting things to get stories. You've got to wonder how it is that a woman whose pride permits her to spy on Bob Saget (the host of "America's Funniest Home Videos" doing one of the celebrity cameos that have become a trademark of the show) with a telephoto lens can jib at accepting alimony from a man who can obviously afford to pay it. But the point is that she is a fantasy figure. The gals who watch want to imagine themselves keeping their self-respect even as they are forced by circumstances to do the most unpleasant things. And of course she gets to do all the rest of the "Seinfeld" routine: make wise-

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cracks, cope with all the bad things that turn up on dates, and advise friends who have a habit of getting themselves into comic predicaments.

But it is not just sitcoms that issue from Groupthink Productions. The comfortingly familiar clichés of "Caroline in the City" or "The Naked Truth" are also to be found in the deeply meaningful TV dramas that Charles McGrath finds so praiseworthy. The biggest critical success of this season is "Murder One" by Steven Bochco, the creator of "Hill Street Blues," "L.A. Law," and "N.Y.P.D. Blue." Unfortunately, ABC made the mistake of putting the show up against last season's big hit and one of McGrath's favorites, NBC's "E.R." It did not fare well in this time slot, and it had to be taken off the air from Thanksgiving until it returns in January on a different night. But the show, for all the critical superlatives that it attracted, is just a slicker version of NBC's "Law and Order" or even another newcomer that fared less well at the hands of the critics, CBS's "Courthouse."

Bochco's shows have that little something extra, however, that appeals to the critics. For one thing the acting and production values are always out of TV's top drawer, the scripts are not self-evidently absurd, and their topicality is a little sharper and more delicately handled than the "disease of the week" stuff that tends to prevail elsewhere. But above all, he knows how to appeal to TV critics' sense of "reality." This is mainly a clever exercise in public relations. Bochco lets it be known that his new show is indebted to Court TV, which he calls "the best show on TV." He proudly announces that "we have absolutely no shame that in 'Murder One' we have, some might say, ripped off Court TV. I say we've made them a little homage." He also denies, but not quite convincingly, that he got the idea for a show that would follow a single murder case through an entire season from the popularity of the O. J. Simpson trial. *The New York Times* even ran a story on how the news coverage of the closing arguments in the Simpson trial cut deeply into the ratings of "Murder One" on the same night. The Simpson trial, of course, was hardly any more certifiable reality than any other TV show. But it is fiction that profits from the confusion of truth and fiction, or from making people believe that they are confused.

In fact, by far the greatest influence on "Murder One" is Bochco's own classic show "Hill Street Blues," which pioneered the technique of combining multiple plot lines, resolving some each week and allowing others to carry over to the next week. The only unity is that of the work place, a police department or a big law firm or a hospital. In "Murder One" he has altered the formula slightly so as to follow one plot line—an incredibly complicated and, to the casual viewer, pretty much incomprehensible tale involving a billionaire's being accused of the murder of his mistress's fifteen-year-old sister—through a whole season. But, as in Bochco's earlier hits, there are also a number of subplots to help keep interest alive. These, as in the other series, tend to be of two types. One is the type that is meant to demonstrate the sagacity of the show's heroes or, more rarely, the perfidy of its villains.

"Murder One" has just one hero, the impressive bald figure of Ted Hoffman (Daniel Benzali), who is the law firm's senior partner. In one show Ted had to deal with the hiring of a jury consultant. The choice came down to a boastful white man who claimed never to have lost a case, except one where a client pigheadedly refused to take his advice, and a black woman whose won/lost record was twenty-eight to four but who humbly pointed out that three of the four losses had been when she was just starting out and that she had learned more from them than from her victories. In the fourth "I screwed up." Guess which one wise old Ted chose? On another occasion, a partner in the firm was sleeping with a reporter to whom he leaked confidential information. When Ted found out about it did he sack the guy on the spot?

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Not a bit of it! He gave him a stern talking-to and another chance, for which the personable young man was pathetically grateful. That Ted! What a guy!

The other kind of subplot is the topical or socially relevant one, such as teenage gang violence in the inner city. The firm of high-priced defense lawyers improbably get involved in such a case because the defendant is the younger brother of a popular (and therefore rich) black rapper. He is also only twelve years old. On the one hand this may diminish the firm's achievement in getting the kid off on a charge of murder by proving self-defense, but on the other hand it increases the topicality value by showcasing this prematurely grown-up child who assured the court under the sympathetic questioning of his own attorney that "I seen plenty of people killed" in his short life and was himself shot at for the first time when he was only six years old.

In addition to these subplots there are the usual office romances and quarrels to add spice to the mix in a way common to the other Grade-A, McGrath-approved dramas. This technique is now as common to TV drama as the "Seinfeld"-type wisecracking friends sitting around a table in a restaurant is to sitcom. But in "Murder One," even more than in "N.Y.P.D. Blue" or "E.R.," all these various strands are tied together by the central character of Ted Hoffman. He it turns out is not only shrewd but wise and good and, well, almost intellectual. "I feel like I've been watching a production of *Waiting for Godot*," he says in reply to a cryptic remark of one of his colleagues: "it's fascinating but what does it mean?"

Well, at least that is what passes for intellectual on network TV. Mostly we get a more homely style of moralizing, as in: "The real measure of a man is what he does when no one else is looking. When he has only his own sense of right and wrong to guide him." Confronted by that sort of thing, I feel a bit like Ted about *Godot*: It sounds good, but what does it mean? Who is it that decides what is the real and what the fake when it comes to measures of men? But when it comes to lawyering, Ted doesn't miss a trick. When his wife (Patricia Clarkson) asks him about the second suspect in the murder, Neil Avedon (Jason Gedrick), "How can you look your daughter in the eye if you know that Neil Avedon killed a fifteen-year-old girl and you got him off? Without missing a beat, Ted replies: "That's the wrong question. The right question is, How can I look her in the eye if I don't give Neil Avedon the same presumption of innocence that the Constitution does?"

It's a laughable evasion when you think about it. But who bothers to think about it? He is as sure of the right question as he is of the real measure of a man. And the point for TV viewers is his self-confidence, the point is to sound good, like *Godot*, without raising any awkward questions about meaning. Ted is an idealized figure designed as much as the girl sitcom stars to make his audience feel better about themselves. He certainly doesn't challenge anyone. He does not excite pity and terror. He does not even encourage his audience to identify themselves with him, since it is part of his comforting quality to be more sagacious than we are. And this is the show that Tom Shales of *The Washington Post* says "exists on a high and mighty level of its own, one that most other producers don't even seem to be aiming at . . . another triumph for producer Steven Bochco."

Why, then, since it is so close to the classic Bochco formula, has it not done any better in the ratings? Perhaps it was the concept that failed. "What we're trying to do," Bochco told *The New York Times*, "is create a long-term impact. One that requires its viewership to defer gratification for a while, to control that impulse in anticipation of a more complex and more fully satisfying closure down the road. It's the same commitment you make when you open up to the first page of a novel." Or maybe the show's lack of resemblance to a novel—a good novel, at any rate, a rare enough thing itself these days—also had

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something to do with the difficulties faced by an O.Jaded audience in mustering the necessary sympathy for the idealism of high-priced defense attorneys who defend rich sleazebags accused of murder.

But I would like to think that the true explanation is that the audience is getting to be a bit more sophisticated about what it is willing to accept as "reality." Bochco told *The New York Times* that his own addiction to Court TV was owing to "the camera. The camera that just watches very dispassionately what goes on in the courtroom. And reveals so much more than what we've ever revealed before. You know, in an episode of 'L.A. Law,' let's say, it's educated the public as to what goes on below the waterline." Like President Clinton in his concern for the TV news-watchers of America, Bochco may just be saying this to flatter his audience. But the audience, in the wake of the Simpson trial, may finally have caught on to the fact that the presence of a camera fatally compromises the "reality" of what it records. We shall find out if they start watching less television.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

The hunter Gracchus *by Guy Davenport*
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Earl Wild & Leon Fleisher at Carnegie Hall *by James F. Penrose*
The life of Adam Smith *by David Frum*
Classical verse in translation *by D. S. Carne-Ross*
The poetry of John Davidson *by X. J. Kennedy*
New poems *by Robert McDowell, Judith Baumel & Charles Tomlinson*

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Books

Losing faith

by Brooke Allen

John Updike has written a new novel, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*,[1] which illustrates Pascal's assertion that "reason's final step is the recognition that there are an infinite number of things which are beyond it." The novel's religious element should be emphasized, because otherwise it would seem that Updike has strayed off into Gore Vidal territory with this lengthy saga covering four generations of an American family linked by their feelings for that pre-eminent twentieth-century American obsession, the movies.

Updike has already described his own pragmatic, Pascalian road to belief in the final chapter of his autobiographical book *Self-Consciousness*.

> Of my own case, looked at coldly, it might be said that, having been given a Protestant, Lutheran, rather antinomian Christianity as part of my sociological make-up, I was too timid to discard it. My era was too ideologically feeble to wrest it from me, and Christianity gave me something to write about, and a semblance of a backbone, and a place to go on Sunday mornings, when the post offices were closed.

He looks at his situation less coldly, however, during the course of that chapter and presents an intelligent reflection on the universal will to believe, giving as one amusing example an argument that occurred when Picasso chastised Matisse for designing and decorating a chapel; both men had claimed to be non-believers. Matisse defended himself: "Yes, I do pray; and you pray too, and you know it all too well: when everything goes badly, we throw ourselves into prayer. . . . And you do it; you too. It's no good saying no."

Updike's religious faith is more formal than that; in fact, it is something he has spent a lot of time thinking about. Protestantism is his creed of choice not because he believes its doctrines to be truer or the way of life it enjoins more perfect, but because it happens to be the manifestation of the religious impulse that is specific to his own country and century. Even as an adolescent, he writes, "I reluctantly perceived of the Christian religion I had been born into that almost no one believed it, believed it really —not its ministers, nor its pillars like my father and his father before him." (This is a state of affairs not peculiar to America in the 1940s: in an age of almost universal "faith," the sixteenth century, Martin Luther complained that "genuine Christians are none too common. I wish I could see two together in a place.")

In the Beauty of the Lilies is superficially concerned with the cinema, but here the cinema is less important in itself than as a symbol of the quest for transcendence and perfection: as the century progresses the

1 *In the Beauty of the Lilies* by John Updike; Knopf, 512 pages, $25.95.

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movies become significant to the lives of the Wilmot family in a way that organized religion has ceased to be, but their journey away from an inner life dominated by the church toward one ruled by a jumble of celluloid images turns out to be a circular one which takes them back to a genuine idea of God. "The need for our 'I' to have its 'Thou,'" as Updike wrote in *Self-Consciousness*, "something other than ourselves yet sharing our subjectivity, something amplifying it indeed to the outer rim of creation, survives all embarrassments, all silence, all refusals on either side." It also, in the end, survives Copernicus, Darwin, and Hollywood.

Updike's narrative begins in 1910, at the moment that the Reverend Clarence Wilmot of Paterson, New Jersey, loses the last vestige of his religious faith. Clarence is a scholarly and rather passive man who has gone into the Church not from sincere zeal but because his father had planned it so; his malleable soul and gentlemanly manners have stood him in good stead with the governing elders of Paterson's Fourth Presbyterian Church.

Shaken by challenges posed in books like *Some Mistakes of Moses* by Robert Ingersoll and *What Is Darwinism?* by Charles Hodge, and in the writings of Nietzsche and Marx, Clarence concludes that "the God of the Pentateuch was an absurd bully, barbarically thundering through a cosmos entirely misconceived. There is no such God, nor should there be." A pragmatic person, like one of the ministers of Updike's own Pennsylvania youth, would not have considered ruining himself and his family over a matter of conscience. But Clarence finds himself unable to go through the motions, and begs leave to quit the ministry. The church administrators and elders don't really see what the problem is: Clarence is well-respected in the parish; why can't he just stay on and continue to perform his duties, while keeping his doubts to himself? Clarence's wife, Stella, agrees, especially since she and their three children are threatened with the loss of home and livelihood. "Stop this tedious mooning about faith!" she scolds, and when Clarence explains the theological arguments that have tormented him she replies that "reason isn't everything. There are things beyond it." Had she read Pascal she might have added, "Le coeur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point."

Once Clarence rejects his vocation he discovers that Paterson has no more use for him. His world does not tolerate doubt, much less failure: "The immigrant hordes had brought to America German radicalism and Italian anarchism and Semitic materialism; this was no time for native-born Protestants to grow lax and abandon the sublime values and articles of faith that had induced God to shower down upon them the blessings due a chosen people." Clarence is reduced to selling encyclopedias door-to-door for a pitifully meager commission; during his rapid plunge down the social ladder he notices a number of people formerly numbered among the untouchables—Irish and Italians in particular—passing him in the course of their own upward trajectory. Stella is reduced to cleaning houses (though she draws the line at working for any of her husband's former parishioners) and the children must scramble for an education and a place in life.

Clarence's only path of escape is into the nickelodeon, where he becomes one of the earliest worshipers at the shrine of the moving image. "Ever since his revelation three years ago of God's non-existence, he had carried around with him a crusty, stunned feeling—a clinging sense of lostness. . . . The moving pictures' flutter of agitation and gesticulated emotion from women of a luminous and ideal pallor licked at his fevered brain soothingly." The cinema slips in to fill the gap left by God's departure.

Clarence and Stella's youngest son, Teddy, is passive, like his father, but lacks his father's probing intelligence. Growing up in Basingstoke, Delaware, to which the family has repaired after Clarence's death—an apple-pie American town with a marked resemblance to Updike's own Shillington,

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Pennsylvania—young Teddy drifts aimlessly until his enterprising aunt finds him a niche as the town mailman. Teddy's only obviously positive quality is his hatred of organized religion, a flame kept alight as a gesture of filial love, but he is strong enough to snatch happiness when it is offered. It comes in the person of Emily, a pretty but shy and lame young woman. This retiring couple surprisingly gives birth to a dynamo: Esther, or Essie, born in the early days of the Depression.

Updike always writes best when he writes about himself, and his worst bloopers occur when he strays among people who are exotic to him. *In the Beauty of the Lilies* is no exception. The remoter past seems to elude the author; the dialogue is unnatural, the narrative too detached, as though Updike were placing himself in 1910 or 1920 more as an intellectual exercise than because of a genuine creative impulse. Accordingly, Essie, who closely resembles Updike himself with her loving parents, her happy small-town Depression childhood, her ambition and her precocious talent, is the most vivid character in the novel and its central intelligence.

The beautiful little Essie has a tendency to smugness, as perhaps did the preternaturally gifted little John Updike—"she couldn't blame the other children for being jealous of her and calling her 'stuck-up.' She wasn't stuck-up, she just was perfect and so glad of it"—but Essie's confidence and sense of election, her easy relationship with a God she neither questions nor examines too closely, make her a rather attractive character. Unlike her sterner Calvinist forebears, she is perfectly comfortable with her body and accepts sex both as a source of pleasure and as a weapon for the manipulation of men. "God understood. He made us, after all."

Essie eventually becomes the midcentury substitute for the deity, a screen goddess whose image is worshiped throughout the country. Ruthlessly ambitious, she makes her way in a very short time from second runner-up in the Miss Delaware Peach Competition to being a major star of the Natalie Wood variety, and weathers the difficult transition into her thirties by going platinum blonde and landing leading roles in movies like *Cream Cheese and Caviar* opposite Paul Newman.

Essie retains her easygoing religion: one of the funniest moments in the book occurs when, as a young starlet, she holds her own in negotiations with "King" Cohn, and after much crude sexual repartee is only genuinely shocked when he asks her whether she is a Christian Scientist. "I'm a Presbyterian," she answers quickly, to which Cohn responds, "I bet you are, baby. Well, whatever helps you through the tough spots."

But Esther takes her God for granted; she fails to let anyone else in on her special relationship with Him, and keeps her son Clark, the product of one of her three ill-considered marriages, on the sidelines. Clark grows up an emotionally neglected Hollywood kid, unable to escape his mother's powerful orbit. In his search for his own place in the world he comes into fateful contact with a David Koresh–style cult leader, Jesse Smith. Smith brushes off Clark's anecdotes about his famous mother and reels in his fish with a canny lie: "I am the only person you will meet who is not interested in your mother. I am interested in you." Smith's religious community goes the way of Koresh's, but in a moment of genuine grace—grace from his own God, suddenly revealed to him—Clark redeems his miserable life by saving others. Thus ends the family story, with the rationalist scruples that killed the great-grandfather's faith being subsumed in a spontaneous, emotional adherence to the spirit rather than the letter of belief.

In the Beauty of the Lilies has far too many faults to be considered one of Updike's better novels. It feels too planned, too structured; it contains little of the complex, subjective, poetically-charged writing that marks Updike's best work. Both Clarence and Teddy fall flat as characters, possibly because they are so remote from Updike

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himself. Even Essie is not entirely successful, because Updike fails to be very convincing in the voice of a young girl. (But then, how many male writers have succeeded at that? I can't think of one.)

Imperfect as fiction, *In the Beauty of the Lilies* is nevertheless of interest as the attempt of a considerable writer to give shape to America's ever-fascinating spiritual struggles. Apostasy and fanaticism continue to be as much a part of our world as they were in Clarence Wilmot's day, or even during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Our culture has come to terms with neither God nor His absence.

The talk of the Salon

John Goodman, translator
Diderot on Art.
Introduction by Thomas Crow.
Yale University Press.
Vol. 1: The Salon of 1765
& Notes on Painting.
250 pages, $40; $18 paper.
Vol. 2: The Salon of 1767.
344 pages, $45; $20 paper

reviewed by Karen Wilkin

Ideal criticism, Baudelaire wrote, is "partiale, passionnée, politique"—"subjective, impassioned, committed." Add "conversational, opinionated, informal" and you have a description of the writings of the man who could be called the first modern art critic, the great eighteenth-century *philosophe* Denis Diderot. Diderot's detailed reports on the "Salons"—vast exhibitions, held at the Louvre, of works by members of the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture—hold their own with the liveliest, most personal documents of the period, and, at the same time, point ahead to such nineteenth-century efforts as the art writing of Baudelaire or Stendhal. Composed equally of meticulous observation, unabashed value judgments, uninhibited digressions, and outrageous asides, Diderot's "Salons" vividly bring to life the taste, aesthetic arguments, and obsessions of an entire era. They are also models of vigorous, flexible language, a French that is elegantly refined and wholly natural, cultivated and informal, either all at the same time or with one mode dominating, according to what is suitable to the subject. Even a cursory reading of these trenchant chronicles makes it easy to understand why their author was celebrated for his brilliant conversation. Great stuff, in other words.

In Diderot's lifetime, these remarkable essays remained unknown to the public, since they were written for a private manuscript newsletter, *Correspondance littéraire*, edited in Paris by an expatriate German and circulated through diplomatic channels; its subscribers, never more than fifteen at a time, included the rulers of Russia, Poland, and Sweden, the Grand Duke of Tuscany, and a cross-section of German nobility. Eventually, Diderot's commentaries were published, but only in French. English-speaking audiences either had to read them in the original or rely on translated fragments embedded in broader discussions. (Michael Fried's *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, for example, includes substantial chunks of the "Salons" in support of its thesis.) This fall, an English translation of Diderot's critical writings on art appeared at last. Yet even this two-volume edition is not complete, but is limited to his long, discursive discussions of the Salons of 1765 and 1767, which are generally regarded as the highpoints of his career as a critic. Volume 1 also includes "Notes on Painting," a text on aesthetics written in 1766 as an appendix to "The Salon of 1765." It has taken almost two hundred years—the first of Diderot's "Salons" was published in France in 1798—but this new English edition, ably and intelligently translated and annotated by John Goodman, with a thoughtful introduction by Thomas Crow, was worth waiting for.

Goodman's English faithfully captures both the rapid, conversational style of Diderot's French and its lapidary elegance.

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Goodman has tilted his translation toward the vernacular by using contractions throughout, a device that obviously does not altogether mirror Diderot's constructions; it does, however, capture the informality of the original, the sense that we are reading private notes made in front of the works of art. Crow provides an informative, eminently readable context, leading us through the complex histories of the Academy system and the Salons, reminding us of the gulf that separated artists who were Academicians, in terms of reputation and preferment, from those who were not.

Just as eighteenth-century France saw the development of such great complexes for the production of state-owned monopolies as a Royal Saltworks, a Royal Foundry, and a Royal Glassworks, the establishment of the Salon in 1737 created a kind of state monopoly on the exhibition of art, or at least of the art produced by members of the Royal Academy. Only members of the Academy, who had followed the prescribed course of study and had been deemed worthy by their senior colleagues, could receive royal commissions or establish schools. (Non-Academicians could function as painters and sculptors, but under the guidelines of the medieval guild.) Only Academicians could exhibit in the immense annual or biannual summer exhibitions that came to fill a great square salon of the Louvre—which gave the show and the pamphlets written about it their name. It's difficult for anyone used to today's constant barrage of exhibits, small and large, uptown and downtown, to conceive of the impact and importance of this great collective event. Perhaps the Whitney Biennial offers an analogy, in terms of notoriety if not of effect, although it has none of the inclusiveness of the Salons, where many hundreds of works were hung edge to edge, with large-scale, heroic figure paintings with classical or religious motifs slung high, and smaller, more intimate works hung at eye level. Like the Whitney's recurring extravaganzas, the Salons were regarded as public entertainments, and they attracted an extraordinarily diverse group of visitors throughout the six weeks of the exhibition; members of the nobility and the middle classes crowded together with artisans and foreign visitors to view the spectacle, one of the very few times the classes mingled in the days of the *Ancien régime*.

Visitors did not contemplate the works of art with hushed reverence but apparently indulged in spirited discussions, expressions of opinion, and debate, among artists and the lay public alike; and printed commentary—the origins of modern-day art criticism—soon appeared that not only described what was to be seen but also echoed these exchanges. Yet by the 1750s, this had become limited almost exclusively to what Crow calls "tame, affirmative reviews," regulated by the authorities on the principle that negative comments would prejudice readers who hadn't seen the show against the artists who received poor reviews, thereby damaging their reputations. There was often little difference between the catalogue of the exhibition, with its explanation of the subject of each work, and the commentaries published about the show.

Diderot's essays, quite to the contrary, are not only meticulously descriptive—a necessity, given the technology of illustrations of the period—but argumentative, demanding, highly critical. Why, is obvious. His audience, back in their palaces in Sweden and Russia, relied on him to re-create for them the experience of visiting the Salon in all its aspects. The carefully crafted immediacy of Diderot's "Salons," which read as though they were written on the spot, deliberately echoes the aesthetic free-for-alls held in front of the pictures. (Diderot's initial report on the Salon of 1759, written at the request of the publisher of *Correspondance littéraire*, is quite short and probably is a record of his immediate responses; his later, greatly expanded essays preserve the rapidly noted quality of the first.) Diderot makes no effort to be polite or agreeable. "I collected," he says at the beginning of his article on the Salon of 1765, "the verdicts of

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old men and the thoughts of children, the judgments of men of letters, the opinions of sophisticates, and the views of the people; and if it sometimes happens that I wound artists, very often it's with weapons they themselves have sharpened for me." Sometimes he is very acerbic, indeed. How did he get away with it? Since *Correspondance littéraire* was not published in the ordinary sense, but circulated privately, it escaped the scrutiny of the Royal censors.

Diderot's readers relied on him not only for news of what was going on in the Parisian art world of the day, but for advice and "hot tips" about what to collect—remember that Diderot negotiated the sale of important collections of French painting to Catherine the Great of Russia, one of the newsletter's subscribers. Writing about the Salons of 1765 and '67, he seems full of confidence, voluble, happy to declare himself. He conscientiously takes his readers through the shows, following the presentation in the official catalogue. Each entry begins with a description, as much to jog Diderot's own memory, perhaps, as to enlighten his readers, followed by a discussion of the work's merits and faults; with pictures he takes seriously, these can turn into long digressions, sometimes cast in the form of real or imaginary conversations. In a celebrated passage written to "fill out" an entry on a controversial Fragonard, which Diderot failed to see because it had been removed by the time he visited, he invents a extended dialogue with the publisher of the newsletter about the depiction of classical themes, ostensibly a description of "a very strange vision which tormented me one night, after a day on which I'd spent the morning looking at the paintings and the evening reading some of Plato's dialogues."

Diderot pulls no punches. "Taste is deaf to all pleas," he writes. What is taste? "A capacity, acquired through reiterated experience, to sense the true or the good, along with the circumstances rendering it beautiful, and to be promptly, vividly moved by it." The critic's role is to apply his taste and decide what is true, good, and beautiful, and what is not. "I must warn you, my friend," he writes, "not to assume that all the paintings I discuss briefly are simply bad. [Many] are positively detestable, infamous." A later entry bears out the warning: "We owe, my friend, a bit of thanks to our bad painters," he writes of a now forgotten exhibitor, "for they spare both your copyist and my time. Please convey my gratitude to Monsieur Valade, if you ever meet him." A further note on Diderot's method follows: "When I point out flaws in a composition, assume, if it's bad, that it would remain bad even if its faults were corrected; and if it's good, that it would be perfect if these faults were corrected."

Diderot has absolutely no hesitancy about suggesting changes that would improve pictures. He does not content himself with minor cavils about drawing or rendering but provides long recipes for what the painter's entire conception should have been from the beginning. His advice about a group of four thematically linked pastorals by Boucher, which together tell the story of the course of a love affair, is relatively mild: "This is less interesting than the preceding one," he says of the third panel, "and it's the artist's fault. This should have been the spot of the rendezvous; it's the fountain of love. The color still rings false." He praises the details of the fourth panel, which depicts the rendezvous, but insists that "the letter should have been read here, and the rendezvous placed at the fountain of love."

Even pictures Diderot admires wholeheartedly can elicit a spate of corrections. He writes of a Greuze, *The Bad Son Punished*, which he finds otherwise first rate: "I don't think the mother's action rings true for this moment; it seems to me that she'd have put up one of her hands over her eyes, to block out both her son and her husband's corpse, and directed the ungrateful son's attention to his father's body with the other. The rest of her face could have expressed the intensity of her pain just as clearly, and her figure would have been even simpler and more sympathetic."

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Diderot praises Greuze as "the first who has set out to give art some morals, and to organize events into series that could easily be turned into novels." Morality counts for a great deal. Diderot goes into raptures over Greuze's *The Well-Loved Mother*, in the Salon of 1765, declaring this imaginatively composed image of a large and affectionate family to be "excellent both for the talent it demonstrates and for its moral content; it preaches population, and paints a sympathetic picture of the happiness and advantages deriving from domesticity." By contrast, Boucher is repeatedly taken to task for both his subject matter and his execution. Diderot writes of Boucher: "there's such a confusion of objects piled one on top of the other, so poorly disposed, so motley, that we're not dealing so much with the pictures of a rational being as with the dreams of a madman . . . And then in his landscapes there's a drabness of color and uniformity of tone such that, from two feet away, his canvas can be mistaken for a strip of lawn or bed of parsley cut into a rectangle." Diderot sees these problems as expressions of flaws in Boucher's character: "I don't know what to say about this man. Degradation of taste, color, composition, character, expression, and drawing have kept pace with moral depravity. What can we expect this artist to throw onto canvas? What he has in his imagination. And what can be in the imagination of a man who spends his life with prostitutes of the basest kind? " But Diderot backs up his moral objections to Boucher with a list of pictorial shortcomings, faulting his figures both for their low moral tone—"[His] Virgins? Precious little flirts. And his angels? Wanton little satyrs"—and for formal problems. Boucher, Diderot complains, seems to have stopped looking at nature, and instead works by rote, to produce predictable stock figures that lack truth and invention. Yet despite his antipathy, Diderot's eye, his "brutal taste," as he terms it, forces him to praise some of Boucher's pictures, just as, despite his enthusiasm for Greuze, that same "brutal taste" obliges him to declare that along with "many excellent" works by the artist in the Salon of 1765 are "some mediocre, some good."

Throughout, Diderot makes it clear that what he values most is a seamless fusion of imaginative conception and appropriate staging; technique is important and necessary, but less significant than conception. When he celebrates the now-forgotten Francesco-Giuseppe Casanova (a pupil of Guardi's and the brother of *the* Casanova) Diderot calls him "a great painter. He has imagination, he has verve; his brain gives forth horses that whinny, caper, bite, kick, and fight, men who slaughter one another in a hundred different ways, smashed skulls, pierced chests, screams, threats, fire, smoke, blood, the dead, the dying, all the confusion, all the horror of a free-for-all. He also knows how to arrange the most tranquil of compositions." And, Diderot adds, almost as an afterthought, "several of the most important technical skills are his to command," without itemizing them.

Greuze is praised for his ability to tell stories with a wealth of truthfully observed details, stories that send the viewer into reveries about what has happened in the time before the scene depicted and what will happen as a result. Greuze's *Young Girl Crying Over Her Dead Bird*, which Diderot calls "a delicious painting, the most attractive and perhaps the most interesting in the Salon," provokes a long, one-sided conversation with the weeping subject of the picture, about the cause of her grief. Nothing to do with the death of a bird, Diderot concludes; everything to do with seduction and abandonment. He reminds us that Greuze had already painted a similar subject, using the metaphor of a broken mirror. (There's also one with a basket of broken eggs, a spilled pitcher, and more; images of lost innocence obviously appealed to eighteenth-century French collectors.)

Diderot's fascination with subtleties of visual narrative is not surprising in a sophisticated viewer of the period. What *is* surprising are the occasional flashes of "formalist"

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criticism, notes about painterly concerns that remind us of his friendships with artists and his participation in their conversations. The "Notes on Painting" that follow "The Salon of 1765" bear witness to Diderot's familiarity with studio talk, as do his entries on his friend Chardin's pictures. It's very much to Diderot's credit that Chardin was one of his favorite painters—and for what present-day observers might call the "right" reasons. "The man is the finest colorist in the Salon and perhaps in all of painting," Diderot says, marveling at the orchestration of hues in a picture unpromisingly titled *Third Painting of Refreshments Intended for a Place Between the Two Others*: "The biscuits are yellow, the jar is green, the handkerchief white, the wine red, and the juxtaposition of this yellow, this green, this white, this red refreshes the eye with a harmony that couldn't be bettered; and don't think this harmony is the result of a weak, bland, over-finished style; not at all, the handling throughout is of the greatest vigor." (Diderot tells the collectors among his subscribers: "If it's true that no connoisseur can dispense with owning at least one Chardin, this is the one to go after.")

The discussion of *A Basket of Plums* is even more remarkable: "Chardin's handling is unusual. It resembles the summary style [*manière heurtée*] in the way one can't make things out from close up, while as one moves away the object coalesces and finally resembles nature; *and sometimes it affords as much pleasure from close up as from a distance*. (Italics mine.) This man is as superior to Greuze as the sky is high, but in this respect alone. He has no style; no, I'm mistaken, he does have one that's his alone; but because it's his own style, it should ring false in certain circumstances, and it never does."

Most of the artists Diderot writes about interest modern readers less than Chardin or even Boucher, Fragonard, and Greuze. The majority of the Academicians of the mid-eighteenth century are now forgotten, obscure, or of interest only to specialists. Diderot admired many of them, but found even more wanting. In "Notes on Painting," he takes the system that produced these artists to task. Nature, Diderot maintains, "does nothing that is not correct" (think about Rousseau and the idealistic values of the Enlightenment when you read this), but the Academy destroys the aspiring artist's ability to learn from nature. During the "seven cruel and difficult years" spent drawing from the model at the Academy, "one's draftsmanship becomes mannered. All these studied, artificial, carefully arranged, academic poses, all these movements coldly and ineptly imitated by some poor devil, and always the same poor devil, who's paid to appear, undress, and let himself be manipulated by a professor three times a week, what do they have in common with postures and movements in nature?"

But reproducing nature, however faithfully, is not enough. The artist must spark the viewer's imagination, just as experiencing nature directly does. Confronted by a high mountain covered with an ancient forest and a rushing stream that descends to a canal and then to a mill set among tidy farm buildings, Diderot tells us, "I look into myself and I dream." The dream is a complex chain of reasoning and association that ends in a sort of *frisson*. The philosopher, he says, "reflects, seeing . . . in the rushing water at one moment, the source of life, at another the ravage of the countryside; then thinking on its fusion with larger streams and rivers, on commerce, the inhabitants of the universe connected to one another . . . and his volatile soul will pass rapidly from a tender, voluptuous feeling of pleasure to a sensation of terror, if his imagination proceeds to summon up the waves of the ocean."

Diderot expects no less stimulation from a painting that he regards as good. But the viewer has obligations as well: "pleasure increases proportionately with imagination, sensitivity, and knowledge. Nature and the art that copies it have nothing to say to a man who's stupid or cold, and very little to a man who's ignorant."

Diderot writes primarily about paintings,

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since painting dominated the Salons, but there are short sections devoted to sculpture in his newsletters. Much of the sculpture exhibited he finds problematic. "Sculptors are more attached to the antique than painters," he says, perhaps because no painting has survived from antiquity, while many statues have. He admits that he believes it is more difficult to judge sculpture than painting, although he immediately adds that this doesn't mean that it is more difficult to sculpt than to paint. "Paintings remind me a hundred times over of what I see, of what I've seen; this is not true of sculpture," Diderot says. "I'd take the chance of buying a painting on the basis of my own taste, my own judgment; if it were a statue, I'd ask an artist's advice."

He suggests that this lack of certainty ought to make him less ready to offer an opinion about sculpture, but it doesn't. It shouldn't, because his perceptions turn out to be remarkably acute. In one of those offhand passages, embedded in a long digression, that make the "Salons" such a delight, Diderot ponders the difference between painting and sculpture: "There's the canvas, it's flat, it's on this surface that one must create. The image must spring forth, advance, take on relief so that I can move around it; if not I myself, then my eye; it must take on life. But if it's modelled, it must live through its modelling, without resorting to the life-bestowing resources of the palette."

Diderot's reports on the Salons of 1765 and 1767 and his "Notes on Painting" are the most ambitious and boldest of his art writings. They show him at his peak. Earlier, he seems to be finding his way, testing his abilities, while later on, he seems gradually to lose interest in the enterprise, although there are fascinating nuggets to be extracted from all the "Salons." The report about the exhibition of 1781, for example, is absorbing because it marks the beginning of the ascendancy of a new generation of Neo-Classicists not much to Diderot's taste. The Salon of 1781 was the subject of the *philosophe*'s last newsletter. I don't think I'd have renewed my subscription to *Correspondance littéraire* after that.

Whither Bynner?

James Kraft, editor
The Selected Witter Bynner: Poems, Plays, Translations, Prose & Letters.
University of New Mexico Press,
326 pages, $24.95

James Kraft
Who Is Witter Bynner? A Biography.
University of New Mexico Press,
125 pages, $19.95

reviewed by David Yezzi

According to the poet William Jay Smith, there is an anecdote, perhaps apocryphal, recounting the time that a badly soused Hart Crane teetered up to Witter Bynner in Mexico, warning, "Witter Bynner, you're going to have a bitter winter." With regard to Bynner's reputation as a leading literary figure, Crane's jibe takes on the ring of prophesy: though once at the forefront of American poetry, Bynner's verses have met with chilly regard from subsequent generations of readers and critics. Through the combined efforts of James Kraft, general editor of the five-volume *Works of Witter Bynner* (1978–81), the Witter Bynner Foundation for Poetry, and the University of New Mexico Press (located in Bynner's adopted state of residence), a new edition may rekindle interest in the neglected writer. For *The Selected Witter Bynner: Poems, Plays, Translations, Prose, and Letters*, Kraft draws heavily on his earlier multi-volume set, paring down the writings to one compact compilation. But can such home-team, partisan support see Bynner through to a complete rehabilitation? For Bynner the literary figure, reinstatement seems promising; for Bynner the poet, it is somewhat more difficult to say.

As Kraft's accompanying biography

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makes clear, Bynner was no wallflower. The list of his intimates and acquaintances reads like a rota of prestigious writers and artists from the early twentieth century. Wallace Stevens, Willa Cather, Mark Twain, Ezra Pound, Henry James, Mabel Dodge Luhan, Kenneth Rexroth, Carl Van Vechten, Cecil B. DeMille, Ansel Adams, John Sloan, Rockwell Kent, and a host of others either knew Bynner or corresponded with him. Edna St. Vincent Millay accepted his proposal of marriage before they both thought better of it. In 1923 he traveled with D. H. and Frieda Lawrence to Mexico and was portrayed, albeit unflatteringly, as a minor character in *The Plumed Serpent*, Lawrence's novel based on that trip. Despite such august company, Bynner's own name has fallen almost completely from the literary rolls. Part of the renowned network of artists who settled in the American southwest, he is today recognized as an editor, translator, playwright, essayist, patron of the arts, and perhaps most famously as the perpetrator, along with Arthur Davidson Ficke, of the literary hoax known as "Spectra"—recognized, that is, if one remembers him at all. It is with this sense of the vicissitudes of reputation that Kraft deftly titles his brief life of the poet: "Who *is* Witter Bynner?"

Born in Brooklyn and educated at Harvard, Harold ("Hal") Witter Bynner (1881–1968) was the first of his year to join *The Advocate* under the editorship of Wallace Stevens. After college and the Grand Tour, he took a job at *McClure's* magazine, where he secured A. E. Housman's first American publication and saved an O. Henry story from rejection. His first book of poetry, *An Ode to Harvard* (1907), published when he was twenty-six, elaborates in its long title poem the poet's nostalgia for the Cambridge of Santayana and William James, and contains the theme that would mark much of Bynner's later work: the "oneness" of the human spirit, an ethos gleaned from Whitman though expressed in spare, irregularly rhyming, stichic verse. Housman, another major influence on Bynner's work, commended sections of the *Ode* as "really beautiful poetry."

After *McClure's*, Bynner worked as a publisher's reader for Small, Maynard & Company and there arranged for Pound's first U.S. volumes: *Provençia* (1910), *Sonnets and Ballate of Guido Cavalcanti* (1912), and *Ripostes* (1913). In addition to some eighteen books of poetry, he wrote a handful of plays and translated, at Isadora Duncan's request, Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris*. This last, brushed up under Richmond Lattimore and David Grene's general editorship of *The Complete Greek Tragedies* (University of Chicago Press, 1956), abides as one of Bynner's undiminished triumphs. Another translation, *The Jade Mountain*, Bynner's renderings of Chinese poetry from the T'ang Dynasty, after the literal glosses of Kiang Kang-hu, represents perhaps Bynner's greatest contribution to American letters. The Chinese poems demonstrate admirably Bynner's notion of "passionate patience," the balance in poetry between impulse and craft, between the heat of inspiration and the coolness of quiet intimacy.

It is rare to wish a biography longer than it is, yet Kraft's life of Bynner—ninety-five pages, not counting thirty pages of photographs—stints readers on the kind of detail that would bring the poet more fully to life. Kraft tells of Bynner's proclivity at Harvard for flamboyant, giddy behavior and of his love of the theater, yet he neglects to include Paul Horgan's story of the time Bynner and some friends beset Sarah Bernhart's carriage after a performance, "took the horses out of their shafts," and processed with her through the snowy streets of Boston. Wild scenes of boyish adulation and hand-kissing ensued. Kraft also mentions D. H. Lawrence's limning of Bynner as a secondary character in *The Plumed Serpent*, but nowhere does he suggest the facture of the portrait, or even provide the character's name. In fact, as the novel and its recently published early draft make clear, Lawrence's handling of Owen (Bynner) is less than

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reverent: a bit of a prig, and a pedant of Chinese culture, Owen is pelted with fruit at a bullfight by Mexican villagers, who take aim at the bald crown of his head. Such omissions from Kraft's biography are presumably due less to a weakness for hagiography than to the fact that *Who Is Witter Bynner?* comprises, with some additions, a version of Kraft's biographical essay from the 1978 *Selected Poems*. In preparing his essay as a separate volume, Kraft has broadened its scope to include a fuller consideration of Bynner's writings; the biographical material, however, remains more or less unaltered. While *Who Is Witter Bynner?* proves a helpful companion volume to the new *Selected Writings*, one misses the wealth of telling particulars obviously available to a Bynner biographer that would animate its subject beyond broad psychologizing. Still, Kraft makes a convincing case for Bynner as a prominent and prolific man of letters.

But what of Bynner's poetry? As Joan Richardson points out in her biography of Wallace Stevens, Bynner was, by 1909, "hailed both as the hope of the future for American poetry and as a foil to the decadents. Unlike Stevens, he had been successful at a life in letters. He had lectured on poetry all over the United States and had been an influential editor." Clearly, *Harmonium*, at the time not yet published, has risen to settle that score. What occurred, then, to raze the reputation of a poet so highly acclaimed? To some extent, what occurred was the onset of modernism. Whereas Bynner's style was quiet and unassuming in form and diction, a new, denser, highly allusive poetry was coming to the fore.

Richard Wilbur, a somewhat reserved supporter of Bynner's, in his critical introduction to the 1978 *Selected Poems*, cites "Driftwood" as a pre-eminent example of the poet's lyric gift:

> Come, warm your hands
> From the cold wind of time.
> I have built here, under the moon,
> A many-colored fire
> With fragments of wood
> That have been part of a tree
> And part of a ship.
>
> Were leaves more real,
> Or driven nails,
> Or fingers of builders,
> Than these burning violets?
> Come, warm your hands
> From the cold wind of time.
> There's a fire under the moon.

This is a delicately constructed poem, one in which, to use Wilbur's phrase, the words "prove to be working hard." But Bynner's fragments of driftwood, suggesting cycles of destruction and renewal, were soon obscured by the fragments of civilization that Pound began piecing into the Cantos. By the late Twenties, Kraft suggests,

> he must have realized that the poetry of his friends Ezra Pound and Wallace Stevens, and of T. S. Eliot, was taking over and that his lyric style was losing ground. Their work was often historical and intellectual in content . . . and usually not written in an easily accessible style.

For his part, Bynner, in his essay *The Persistence of Poetry* (1929), reviled "the countless artificers, over-cultured and jaded, who with extensive knowledge of the world's poets . . . fabricate words into strained intellectualized meanings." A line was drawn in the sand between silver and golden, between unadorned diction and the difficulties of modernism. Prominent critics leveled a steady barrage. For R. P. Blackmur, Bynner's poems seemed "all competence and no mastery." Allen Tate thought Bynner's "disastrous facility . . . [betrayed him] into an unreadable dullness of repetition, and often into false intensities." Writing in *The New Republic*, Randall Jarrell criticized in the work "a certain monotony . . . What one feels angry at is the automatic rhetorical romanticism." As a practitioner of the

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simple lyric, Bynner was increasingly in the minority.

Kraft offers an additional reason for Bynner's hot-and-cold reception: the appearance of *Spectra* in 1916. The Spectra hoax, poems published by Bynner and Arthur Davidson Ficke under the pseudonyms Emanuel Morgan and Anne Knish respectively, left a lot of readers uncertain of Bynner's seriousness. Devised as a mock response to Amy Lowell and "the vagaries of various 'schools' such as the 'Imagist,' 'Vorticist,' etc.," Bynner-Morgan's Spectric verse slipped in under the radar of leading editors. The *Little Review* and *Poetry* each accepted poems, and the magazine *Others* devoted an entire issue to the Spectric School in 1917. William Carlos Williams figured among the unwitting supporters of Spectrism, and newspaper headlines heralded the arrival of the movement. The poems, each entitled "Opus" and numbered nonsequentially, display a certain energy and playfulness, as in "Opus 104":

> How terrible to entertain a lunatic!
> To keep his earnestness from coming close!
>
> A Madagascar land-crab once
> Lifted blue claws at me
> And rattled long black eyes
> That would have got me
> Had I not been gay.

As a crowning irony, *The New Republic* invited Bynner of all people to review the new movement for its pages. He declined, later admitting that the joke of Spectra was in the end largely on himself:

> Many a discerning critic of poetry is convinced to this day that, liberated by our pseudonyms and by complete freedom of manner, Ficke and I wrote better as Knish and Morgan than we have written in our own persons. Once in a while we think so ourselves.

Bynner's *Doppelgänger*, conceived as a ruse, loomed in the background of the poet's subsequent work: Morgan's humor and flair for absurd juxtaposition began to insinuate itself. Bynner wrote several more books as Morgan, in the end publishing one of them under his own name: the line between the "genuine" voice and the parodic grew thin.

Spectra notwithstanding, the greatest enduring influence on Bynner's work was his interest in the poetry and culture of China. The two trips he made to that country as a young man informed his identity as a poet, until in 1918, while teaching at the University of California at Berkeley, he began what would become his greatest poetic legacy: the translation of the Chinese anthology *Three Hundred Pearls of the T'ang Dynasty*. The resulting volume, *The Jade Mountain*, took thirteen years to complete and remains one of the freshest versions of these poems in English. The following is a section from Yüan Chên's "An Elegy," a poem oddly absent from Kraft's selection:

> O youngest, best-loved daughter of Hsieh,
> Who unluckily married this penniless scholar,
> You patched my clothes from your own
> wicker basket,
> And I coaxed off your hairpins of gold, to buy
> wine with;
> For dinner we had to pick wild herbs—
> And to use dry locust-leaves for our kindling.
> . . . Today they are paying me a hundred
> thousand—
> And all I can bring to you is a temple sacrifice.

Here is Bynner's "passionate patience" to a tee: high-stakes emotion tempered by measured restraint.

In the way changing poetic tastes shunted his own verse aside, Bynner's Chinese translations laid waste to those by his contemporaries (with the exception of Pound's) and sparked such later efforts as the memorable translations of Tu Fu by Kenneth Rexroth. While there is much to reward a thoughtful reader in Bynner's own lyrics, it is through his various personae—the T'ang poets, and in a peculiar way Morgan—that his voice continues to resonate.

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New York obbligato

Vera Brodsky Lawrence
Strong on Music:
The New York Music Scene in the Days of George Templeton Strong.
Vol. 2: Reverberations, 1850–1856.
University of Chicago Press,
863 pages, $90; $27.50 paper

reviewed by James F. Penrose

Greenwich Street, though close by New York's financial temples, has seen better times. These days, the neighborhood is home to a financial printer (whose house python once amused lawyers and jaded investment bankers at its feeding time), a two-thousand-car Port Authority carpark, and the Thunder XXX Video. In 1835, however, when young George Templeton Strong lived at 180, Greenwich Street was home to a far tonier crowd than the clientele of *Buttman II* and *On Golden Blonde*. A future Wall Street lawyer, Columbia College trustee, founding member and treasurer of the United States Sanitary Commission (predecessor of the American Red Cross), and autocrat-at-large, Strong was also to be one of the great diarists in American history, and his pungent chronicles are the point of departure for the highly informative and amusing second volume of *Strong on Music*. (*Resonances, 1836–1849*, the first volume in the projected three-volume set, was published in 1988.)

Strong kept his diary for forty years, from 1835, when he was a precocious sophomore at Columbia College, to the year of his death, 1875. It was a lively time, when the country sensed, in differing degrees, economic superiority, cultural inferiority, and its ability to use the advantages of the one to deal with the shortcomings of the other. At midcentury, while novelists like James Fenimore Cooper and artists like Benjamin West had long since presented satisfactory cultural credentials to Europe, our musical achievements were considered so modest as to permit the director of the Paris Conservatoire to think he was upholding standards by slamming the audition-room door on the phenomenal young American pianist Louis Moreau Gottschalk while hissing that "America is only good for steam engines!"

The perception of the United States as a giant machine-tool shop and Americans as a nation of mechanics in search of gratification was pounced upon by armies of European performers. Lured westward, a steady procession of virtuosi visited New York as the first stopping place in this "Land of Musical Promise . . . with cities . . . filled . . . with gold and silver and ivory." Our forebears attended concerts for a variety of reasons: curiosity, fashion, sensation, and even for the performances themselves. For whatever motive, however, they heard music to which they would not otherwise have been exposed. While the violinists Ole Bull, Henri Vieuxtemps, and Camillo Sivori, the pianists Sigismund Thalberg, Henri Herz, and Leopold de Meyer, and the sopranos Henriette Sontag, Jenny Lind (the "Swedish Nightingale"), and Marietta Alboni (the "elephant that swallowed the nightingale") all came to reap their share of the bountiful harvest of American shekels, they also left their profound effect on American musical life.

Part of the freshness and vitality of Vera Brodsky Lawrence's excellent series stems from the curious fact that the history of nineteenth-century American music has been so little explored. While the *éclat* of Phineas T. Barnum and Jenny Lind was such that even today non-musicians still half-remember their names, the deadening apathy surrounding our musical history ensures that only few remember why. There is certainly no dearth of raw material: in addition to the immense press coverage that music and its practitioners received, there are roguish and beguiling works left by many of the heroes of Mrs. Lawrence's tale. On the scholarly side, students of the period have contributed useful studies, but these tend to focus on isolated individuals and events. Perhaps the sheer size of the endeavor has been the chief repelling factor?

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Or is it that much of the music of the period has long been considered trash (particularly by those who have established this fact secondhand) and thus unworthy of serious study? At any rate, not since Gilbert Chase's *America's Music* and Arthur Loesser's famous social history, *Men, Women, and Pianos*, has anyone taken such a stimulating and successful approach to the musical history of the time.

"To write a truly great diary, one should keep its composition secret and should intend no early publication of its contents." So wrote Allan Nevins in 1952 in the preface to his and Milton Halsey Thomas's edition of *The Diary of George Templeton Strong*. Circumstances conspired to ensure the complete satisfaction of this principle. The diary was closely guarded by Strong's heirs for over fifty years until a descendent lent it to the museum of the American Red Cross. Little scholarly interest was paid to the document, possibly because of Strong's appalling handwriting. Cramped and minuscule, it appears to describe the erratic wanderings of a hemorrhaging ant. By coincidence, however, the diary came to the attention of Henry Waters Taft, who was writing a history of his law firm, Cadwalader, Wickersham & Taft, the successor to Strong's legal practice. Taft informed Nicholas Murray Butler, president of Columbia University, that Taft was holding a document of considerable historical interest, and, in due season, the diary was published in four volumes by Columbia University Press. Formerly, the diary was easy to find secondhand. These days it is seldom found, and expensive when it is.

Nevins and Thomas's preface noted a conscious editorial omission: "Though we give numerous excerpts from his discriminating criticism of concerts, oratorios, and operas . . . an interesting volume of musical comment could—and some day will—be compiled." A quarter-century after it was written, this remark gave Mrs. Lawrence the idea for her series, but she soon found that, unless she provided some sort of substantive context (such as New York's musical life or the rest of the diary), those music entries by themselves would seem to be too fragmented to make the exercise worthwhile. In the event, Mrs. Lawrence's title is somewhat misleading. Although Strong himself was president of the New York Philharmonic and an enthusiastic amateur musician particularly taken with the Masses of Haydn and Mozart (an amusing indulgence for one so caustic about Catholics), *Strong on Music* covers considerably more territory than the diarist's often irascible mutterings about the state of music and musicians in his hometown. In truth, the author uses the diary as a point of departure for the wider (and wilder) musical life of the period.

The series ranges through the highs and lows of New York's midcentury musical life. In addition to the performances of the great and famous, we see grotesque blackface minstrel shows like the *Albino Minstrels* and heavy-handed opera travesties like *Lucy Did Sham Amour* (Lucia di Lammermoor), as well as the sobrieties of the oratorio-and-motette crowd, who preferred their music as an adjunct to more soulful activity. Musical life is described mostly from the perspective of the critic—sometimes Strong himself (as chiefly found in the chapters headed "GTS") but more often his critical brethren (in the chapters headed "Obbligato"), whose blood-in-the-water approach led them to attack one another with the same savage abandon with which they greeted a performer.

Although New York City's musical life had altogether changed from its small-scale beginnings, a number of quaint absurdities persisted well into the nineteenth century. Professional musicians were still rare; some organizations debarred them completely (along with that other pariah class: women). Recitals were almost unheard-of and concerts were a mishmash of chamber music, popular songs (often sung in dialect), sentimental ballads, chunks of oratorios, and piano reductions of the overture or symphony of the moment. For the Upper Ten, the nose was an organ with which to

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look down on what they regarded as unspeakably debased theatrical and "operatic" performances.

They may have had a point. In those days "opera" belonged more to the genus *Nashville* than *La Scala* and was an art form of infinitely elastic definition. There were horse-operas (animals on stage, with the equine performer assuming a prominent role), aquatic operas (with stage-length tanks of water on which the action took place), ballet burlesques, dramatic travesties of plays, and the frantically popular blackface minstrel productions of Thomas Dartmouth (Daddy) Rice, including that perennial favorite, *Bone Squash Diavolo* (1835). There were gift concerts where prizes rather than performers got top billing, ethnic concerts, temperance concerts (countering the nineteenth-century equivalent of karaoke), bizarre brother/sister and family acts, a group of renegade religious nuts billed as the Shaking Quakers, bell ringers, and strategically draped nudes with names like the Grecian Exercises and the Model Artistes, who, in their own less cynical versions of performance art, re-enacted patriotic, artistic, or even biblical scenes to the accompaniment of a brass band.

These noisy and vaudevillian aspects of musical life contrasted sharply with the received tastes of New York's aristocracy. For Strong and his coevals, musical life started with the foursquare harmonies of church music and did not progress much further. Outside of church, musical life was pursued through sodalities and private performance societies featuring excellent local performers and conductors like Ureli Corelli Hill, George Loder, and Henry Christian Timm, who, aside from their work in the concert hall, were not averse to supplementing their living by arranging travesties and Ethiopian operas for the music hall.

While the upper-caste prejudice against opera and theater performance gradually dissipated, Strong's own distrust of what was heard there largely did not. Strong was among the highest of the High Episcopalians and after the Episcopal Hymnal, Bach and Handel seem to have been his formative influences. The early years of the diary show Strong's wrestling with Beethoven and Weber, and, as far as he was concerned, much of their music bordered *terra incognita*. While still in his twenties, Strong discovered the roots of his lifelong ambivalence toward Donizetti ("ought to be hanged"), Mendelssohn ("unmeaning, stupid, and wearisome"), and Bellini ("stupid and silly"), as well as the foundation of his furious loathing of Berlioz, Verdi, and the other High Romantics.

Strong's somewhat closeted musical education proved to be no impediment to his ability to deliver himself of a vivid and memorable line. A matchless adept of the poisonous phrase, Strong was also capable of elegant and touching praise. He once wrote that the effect of an aria from Weber's *Preciosa* was "one of those things that carry one away with them at the very first note and go on in a perfect glow of intense beauty to the end—it did seem as if the Tabernacle [concert hall] and all in it were beginning slowly to whirl round and round."

The music critic, a subspecies of the murderously belligerent New York journalist, added fizz to this potent broth. With editor-owners beating, suing, and horsewhipping one another as a stress-relieving consequence of their vicious circulation wars, there was plenty of spare bellicosity to trickle into their critics' copy. Their *primus inter pares* was Henry Cood Watson, who, even when professing to admire a performer, couldn't resist the dig. "Antognini has a beautiful tenor voice," he wrote. "We should advise him, however, to keep from public view the disgusting practice of indiscriminate expectoration so peculiar to Italian vocalists." Partisanship and the occasional cash payment were also known to help nudge critical opinion for (or against) a performer. Critical consistency was rare, at least when it came to musical matters. Strong put it well: "Niminy will call it quaint, and Piminy will call it very bad . . . so they'll cackle and bray, according to their

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several gifts." Personality clashes were another matter entirely, and the fraternity was much more predictable when it came to taking sides during their frequent and acrimonious personal disputes.

While the United States was not unknown to European performers before Strong's time, artistic peregrinations to the New World were scarcely causing a shortage of steamship tickets. Starting in 1841, however, the stream of performers steadily increased and, by 1843, Europe's superstars began to arrive. The Norwegian violinist Ole Bull ("as beautiful as Apollo") and the Belgian Henri Vieuxtemps (who played with gold drops pendant from his ears) captivated New York. The press was quick to divide on the merits of the "Norwegian Paganini" and the "Belgian Paganini." While Paganini himself never set foot in the United States, this was a mere trifle to critics who wrote as if they were on familiar terms with Niccolò. Thus, there were French, Irish, and Australian Paganinis, a Paganini of the harp, Paganinis of the accordion and the double-bass and even a Paganini whistler. The Ethiopians also laid their claim: a verse in "Daddy" Rice's notorious song "Jim Crow" contained the line "An' down in old Virginny/ Day say I play/ Like massa Paganinny."

Indeed, "humbug," that quality so dearly beloved of the American public, enjoyed one of its vintage years in 1850, the beginning point of *Reverberations*. Its qualities were described by the critic Richard Grant White. "Humbug," he wrote, "does not necessarily imply a cheat on one side and a dupe on the other. It is the art of drawing attention and attaining success by . . . allowing people to deceive themselves." Its fixed and immutable goal was the seduction and capture of other people's money, generally with the willing connivance of the victim. In the hands of its most able practitioners, music itself was redefined as "the art of attracting . . . by secondary devices which often become the principal ones, the greatest possible number of curious people so that when expenses are tallied against receipts, the latter exceed the former by the widest possible margin." This was what the legendary proto-impresario Bernard Ullman called "financial music." Musical affect was nice, but what really counted was, as they say in baseball, putting butts in bleachers.

Situated at the midpoint of both the Romantic movement and the nineteenth century, 1850 was a pivotal year. The United States was at one of its many cultural crossroads. Still beholden to the colonial tradition, most of our music was imported from Europe. Fourteen years before, however, Ralph Waldo Emerson had famously enquired, "Should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition? . . . There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works."

While national demigods such as Walt Whitman effused about all things American, other Yankees, such as Strong, were more reserved. In Europe, the revolutions of 1848 had galvanized, either through terror or elation, almost everyone. Against this backdrop were the successful conclusion of Liszt's revolution of performance practice and the ascendancy of Beethoven's music. Richard Wagner was writing murky tracts entitled *Art and Revolution* and *The Art Work of the Future*, and Europe had been subjugated by Rossini, Donizetti, and Bellini in preparation for their even greater successor, Giuseppi Verdi. Quarantine of this febrile artistic atmosphere was impossible. When it finally arrived in the United States at around 4:00 in the afternoon of September 1, 1850, with the Swedish mega-soprano Jenny Lind, the dock-side band welcomed her with "God Save the Queen," and all hell broke loose.

Lind had retired from opera performance the previous year. Her timing was auspicious. That unerring barometer of the American character, Phineas T. Barnum, "the True Prophet and Patron Saint of Media Hype," in Mrs. Lawrence's deft phrase, sensed that our tastes had changed. While Barnum knew we had always been infatuated with entertainment (such as his

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own credulity-straining attractions like the Feejee Mermaid and the Woolly Horse), he was willing to bet his fortune that America was ready for "Art." Emersonian sentiments notwithstanding, Barnum knew people would not accept music as "Art" unless it was European.

While the Barnum and Lind episode has been frequently told, it has seldom been told as well or as amusingly. Mrs. Lawrence, a master of the throwaway line, describes Barnum's unprecedented PR campaign with its endless public confidences, commissioned biographies, marketing paraphernalia (Jenny Lind "Segars," Hair Gloss, and Chewing Tobacco), a poetry competition, a Jenny Lind Music Hall, and, above all, adroit, continual, and shameless manipulation of the press. It worked: Lind's performances in this country earned, in the author's words, "all but orgasmic" reviews, even from notorious party-poopers like John Sullivan Dwight. Even Strong, ever suspicious of popular enthusiasms, liked Lind. Artfully placed stories about the Nightingale's church attendance and charitable activities added additional luster to her already absurdly gleaming halo.

Even haloes have their dark sides, however. One of the most interesting features of *Reverberations* is its portrayal of Lind as substantially more than some species of earthbound angel, as Barnum's publicity machine had had it. Before breaking with Barnum (she un-angelically objected to performing in a Philadelphia amphitheater redolent of fresh horse turds), Lind accumulated much professional and personal criticism, which only increased as she continued her tours. But as the author shows, so effective was Barnum's hard sell that even today the surviving image of Lind is that of a wedding-cake bride.

Other renowned singers visited the opera-mad United States during this period. The rotundly sensuous Marietta Alboni ("her *embonpoint* exceeds even the most accommodating standard of symmetry," wrote White) and Henriette Sontag, a particular favorite of Beethoven and Weber, flourished. The brilliant Giulia Grisi and Mario arrived in 1854 and quickly established themselves as the team to beat. The opera world itself was, by Mrs. Lawrence's account, a maze of intrigue, sabotage, backbiting, and petty jealousy—how different from today!—and shaky finances exacerbated matters. While classical companies like Don Francisco Martí's Havana Opera Company and the troupes of Maurice Strakosch and Max Maretzek struggled to remain solvent, Ethiopian opera had no such troubles. Night after night, Christy's Minstrels, Eph Horn ("the prince of Darkies"), and Maximilian Zohrer (who specialized in blackface falsetto imitations of Lind, Sontag, and Alboni) packed 'em in. The year 1853 saw the arrival of Lola Montez. Most of Europe thought Lola was only wasting her strength when standing, as her reputation as slut far exceeded her fame as dancer. But here's a quibble: Mrs. Lawrence recycles Lola's old claim that she and Liszt once enjoyed an indiscretion, although modern scholarship has corroborated Liszt's always forcible denial of the liaison.

While it never appeared to trouble George Templeton Strong overly, the fundamental theme of the series that bears his name is the development of American music. According to Mrs. Lawrence, its unlikely protagonist was the peculiar William Henry Fry. Not a very good composer, not a very good lecturer, and not a very good critic, Fry showed how determination and an unfailing sense of *amour propre* can propel an otherwise mediocre talent into history. Fry used his bully pulpits to bewail the reluctance of New York's fledgling orchestras to perform American music—in particular, his. Fry offered a gargantuan lecture series covering the history of music from ancient times to modern masters in which his own works were the inevitable criteria of excellence. "Didn't suppose that it was possible for a sane man . . . to make such a jackass of himself," observed Strong sourly. Fry's *The Breaking Heart*, *Leonora*, and *The Borderers* were, possibly with reason, the subject of

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barely concealed snickers. One snicker, however, was too much to bear. Upon the critic Richard Willis's fateful review of Fry's limp Santa Claus Symphony, Fry screamed into print with a forty-page rant that touched off a decade-long critical free-for-all about the place of American music and musicians. Although Fry's letter has been read by some as the true start of American music, Mrs. Lawrence convincingly notes that Fry was more akin to Mrs. O'Leary's cow than the mastermind of a cultural revolution.

While America's composers were feeling somewhat stifled, its performers were doing a little better. Louis Moreau Gottschalk, the Creole pianist, survived a shaky start in New York to become, along with Sigismund Thalberg, the smash hit of 1856. Strong, however, was not a Gottschalk partisan. Ever on the alert for piano-bashing (though he admired Thalberg), Strong described Gottschalk's virtuosity as an accumulation of "dirty antics and dexterities," likening it to Romeo pausing in the Balcony Scene and saying "six slim slick saplings" very fast. Warming to his subject, Strong wrote that Gottschalk's delicate fingering put him in mind of "the traveller [who], having gone to sleep in the depths of the tropical forest, is gradually awakened by ants and other bugs crawling over him." New York's critics thought otherwise, reaching a rare concord in their acknowledgment of Gottschalk's mastery.

Strong's opinions on music did not mellow with age. "Tolerable music is not to be endured: a decent and creditable symphony is an abomination," he glowered when but a tender thirty-three, while his furious sentiments about Wagner, Liszt, and Berlioz that would so gratify and irritate later generations were incubating nicely. It would be wrong, however, to dismiss Strong as just a reactionary hothead. Ignoring our contemporaries is the sport of the ages. Indeed, Strong's retrospective tastes are shared by many of us, differing only in degree. Strong emerges as a man to whom standards meant everything and who thought, at least as deeply as today's critics, about aesthetics. It seems that his real sin was the vigor with which he expressed himself. "As Strong's musical preferences narrowed," sighs Mrs. Lawrence, "so did his faculty for verbalizing them expand—sometimes to numbing lengths."

Reverberations, like its predecessor, *Resonances*, is complex and dense. So rich are its characters and so involved were their times that few will come away after a single reading with their recollections intact. Nevertheless, *Reverberations* reads wonderfully well. This is due to Mrs. Lawrence's considerable gifts as organizer and musical historian, but especially to her exceptionally droll observations. Her humor is similar to Arthur Loesser's—clever and detached, often deadly but always fair. As exasperating as Strong was, and as silly as his contemporaries could often be, the author recounts their shortcomings and qualities with the same benign and tolerant affection. At least as captivating is Mrs. Lawrence's evocation of Old New York with its music houses, opinionated and noisy population, bizarre enthusiasms, and its collective delight at all of this astonishing new music. After reading *Strong on Music*, walk around Lower Manhattan to the present-day sights of Strong's houses, Barnum's American Museum, Castle Garden, Niblo's Saloon, the Tabernacle, and the various hotels and dwellings where Lind, Gottschalk, and others slept, and realize that while New York may be young, it too has ghosts.

The uses of the Devil

Andrew Delbanco
The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil.
Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 274 pages, $23

reviewed by James W. Tuttleton

Most of us are probably used to imagining the figure of Satan in Miltonic terms—as the fallen Son of Morning, as Lucifer cor-

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rupted by pride, as the master of Hell himself, inciting all to evil, yet enwrapt in flame, eternally tormented on that burning lake in Pandemonium:

> So stretched out huge in length the arch-fiend lay,
> Chained on the burning lake; nor ever thence
> Had risen or heaved his head, but that the will
> And high permission of all-ruling Heaven
> Left him at large to his own dark designs,
> That with reiterated crimes he might
> Heap on himself damnation, while he sought
> Evil to others.

The American Puritan minister Jonathan Edwards recurs to this fiery image of Hell in his justly famous sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" (1741). There the ungodly are seen to dangle above "a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath," hanging "by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it, and burn it asunder." When they fall "the *Devil* stands ready to fall upon them and seize them as his own." If Hell or "Pandemonium" locates in one place every evil together with its satanic fountainhead, the image of continuous fiery torment in the bowels of Hell has kept more than one believer on the straight and narrow path. For any culture, of course, it is desirable for people to know right from wrong and to live by the right.

Although Milton has given us our most recognizable personification of evil, in my view the most impressive vision of Satan is that found in the *Inferno*. There, after a terrifying descent into deeper and deeper levels of exhibited and punished depravity, Virgil brings Dante down into the ninth and last circle of Hell. This is the abyss most remote from God's life and light and is a place of darkness visible and intensest cold. There Dante and Virgil find all those who have slain their own kin, like Cain; or betrayed their own countries, like Cassius and Brutus; or destroyed innocents who have trusted them, like Judas Iscariot. Locked in the center of this field of encrusted ice is Satan himself, ugly, triple-faced, shagged with rime, befouled and matted and entangled in himself, and frozen in woe. He tries to lift himself, but his fanning wings create such chill that he is locked even more tightly into the frozen crust of ice.

Despite the manifest difference in the image of Satan as enwrapt in fire or encased in ice, both figurations share one thing: the externalization of evil in the form of a personality or being other than ourselves. Now, the idea that evil arises in human affairs because of a malign agency outside oneself is an old one. And, although Andrew Delbanco makes little or nothing of Dante and Milton, this is one of the subjects that he has taken up in *The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil*. Historically considered, the sense of evil has been inseparable from the imagination of the Devil. He has gone by many names (Lucifer, Beelzebub, Belial, the Serpent, the Tempter, and the Prince of the Power of the Air), and, as a conniving shape-shifter, Satan has also presented himself in many different guises throughout history. In both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, he has almost always constituted an agent of evil subverting the lives of the people (King David, Job, Christ) whose stories are fundamental to the Judeo-Christian conception of morality. As St. Peter put it in his first epistle, "your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour."

In any case, Mr. Delbanco, a professor of English at Columbia University and a specialist in colonial American literature, has written at length in *The Death of Satan* about the collapse of the moral sense in American culture as men have abandoned the concept of an actually existing exterior agent of evil and undertaken to account for evil by other means. The book is thus meant to be "a national spiritual biography," lamenting the loss of "some conceptual means for thinking about the sorts of experiences that used to go under the name of

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evil." Delbanco finds evil all around us, but he thinks that we have no way of dealing with it now: "The repertoire of evil has never been richer. Yet never have our responses been so weak."

The Death of Satan offers a rapid historical resumé of reflections on the Devil in American thinking. In surveying this matter, Delbanco remarks quite rightly that, in the early seventeenth century, the American Puritans held to a theological determinism according to which every event had its supernatural origin—as reflecting the agency of God or the work of Satan. He remarks that "the Puritans' Satan was much more an abstract idea than a representable creature or thing." Nevertheless, Satan was real enough. He had spectral powers, could impersonate anyone, and was known by his agents—the self-confessed witches and the savage Indians who resisted the Gospel and tomahawked one's wife and children. But Delbanco is averse to a Christian supernaturalism that sees Satan as *objectified in other people.* That kind of thinking, he believes, leads to the persecution of others, the oppression of the socially "deviant," and eventually to horrors like "ethnic cleansing."

Throughout *The Death of Satan*, Delbanco continually recurs to Melville as the pole star of an American literature preoccupied with the Devil. He stands at the center of a literary tradition that "expounds evil as the capacity to render invisible another human consciousness. Sin, in this view, is the failure to meet what Kant called the 'categorical imperative,' by which one is compelled to treat other persons as ends rather than means." Captain Ahab in *Moby-Dick* is a "demagogue" who compels or seduces men to follow him in attacking an objectified evil. A sort of proto-Hitler or Klan Imperial Wizard, he is "the crusader who construes evil as a malignant, external thing—a thing alien to himself" and thus "by far the worst kind of barbarian. The struggle of the twentieth century was to keep this proficient hater from seizing the world."

I have no quarrel with this view of insane Ahab, but it has nothing to do with the Christian view of evil. Indeed, Ahab is, like the Persian Fedallah, a Zoroastrian whose dualistic faith posits that the world was created by Ormazd, the spirit of light and fire; his twin brother, Ahriman, represents the spirit of darkness and evil, continually at war against this light and life. The disfiguring scar that runs the length of Ahab's body came from his participation in the sacramental rites of fire worship. What could be clearer than Ahab's prayer in the chapter called "The Candles," where he invokes the lightning? "Oh! thou clear spirit of clear fire, whom on these seas I as Persian once did worship, till in the sacramental act so burned by thee, that to this hour I bear the scar; I now know thee, thou clear spirit, and I now know that thy right worship is defiance."

So far as Christianity is concerned, this Zoroastrian idea of a satanic principle of Evil standing co-equal alongside the divine principle of Good is the heresy of Manichaeism. It is anathema to Judeo-Christian theology, which sees God as omnipotent and so not really challenged in authority by one of His own creatures. Lucifer is such a subordinate to "all-ruling Heaven," no matter how much the clown may want to rival God himself. In the *Confessions*, St. Augustine remarks that, although he had once been "under the spell of the Manichaeans" and took evil to be some kind of "substance," he later came to understand evil as *privatio boni*, the absence of good.

Delbanco is most in sympathy with this Augustinian view of evil as a mere nothingness. And he warms to Emerson, who told a group of Harvard students in "The Divinity School Address" (1838) that "Good is positive. Evil is merely privative, not absolute: it is like cold, which is the privation of heat. All evil is so much death or nonentity." According to this view, the Devil is really an unnecessary bit of personification: he will have no space to exist and evil will vanish if we fill our lives with virtuous works. Delbanco calls this Emersonian view of evil a countertradition in New England theology

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in that it conceptualized evil "without relying on an embodied evil spirit." There is nothing heretical about Emerson's definition of evil here. But Delbanco fudges matters in accounting Emerson as a spokesman of New England theology. Since Emerson did not believe in a personal God or in the "only-begotten" divinity of Jesus, his "Divinity School Address" was, to the Christian believers of his time, "The Latest Form of Infidelity," as the Harvard professor Andrews Norton characterized it in an essay.

Still, Delbanco is right to note that the privative view of evil became more and more dominant as Christian faith wavered under the assault of Enlightenment scientism. Increase Mather, a late Puritan holdout, warned in 1684 of "the Sadducees of these dayes" who "say that there are no spirits, and that all stories concerning them are either fabulous or to be ascribed to natural causes." But his warning was ignored. As Puritanism collapsed, the decline of belief in Satan was inevitably accompanied by the eventual loss of belief in God, and with the loss of God, men lost faith in the Christian basis for a wholesome social order.

Later, in the Age of Reason, evil as a concept was further emptied of significance. The former belief in witchcraft was now dismissed as mental delusion; religious ardor was diagnosed as a "phrenzie of the intellects," and too ecstatic a belief in God was no longer a sign of sainthood but of insanity. Partial evil dissolved into a deistic universal good operating through a determinism of natural laws. The foreordination of God gave way to a belief in unalterable scientific phenomena. No supernatural entities were needed by the advocates of Enlightenment reason. Even the virtues, as Franklin's *Autobiography* made plain, were merely skills or habits that could be cultivated like playing whist or learning to dance the minuet. Vice was likewise a mere miscalculation or mental error.

What happens to the concept of evil in such a cultural transition? By Victoria's time, in Delbanco's account, "evil" devolved into "a synonym of dyspepsia and diarrhea, and turns up in advertisements for 'antiscorbutic drops,' guaranteed effective against 'scurvy, leprosy, ulcers, the evil, fistula, [and] Piles.' " As Delbanco remarks,

> The idea that conscious purpose might be driving history and nature seems vaguely insane to most Americans today; but in the late nineteenth century the idea had not yet quite been relinquished—or at least its aftereffects could still be felt. It was still news that nature, according to Darwin, "harbored no . . . purpose." It was still quite recent that in science the "assumption that the world and its parts were designed" was being purged, and teleological language rejected as what one modern philosopher of science has called a "vestigial . . . way of speaking."

As one of these "vaguely insane" who believe that a conscious purpose drives history and nature, I confess that my interest in this book flagged after the first two chapters. Remarks of the kind I have just quoted, frequent enough throughout, show that Delbanco has no grasp of religious faith or of the certitude felt by Christian believers. I don't think he has any insight into the faith of the "People of the Book" either, although he affirms his Jewish identity. By 1800, according to Delbanco, American theological discussion of evil had evaporated. What we have henceforth is evil defined in sociological terms (the effect of class or economic determinism) or in psychoanalytic terms (the effect of repression and neurosis). This is also the point in the book at which Delbanco's impressive command of Puritan and Federalist literature gives way to very general notions about our literature and culture, notions formed at a great distance or formed very long ago.

In Delbanco's opinion, very little of compelling interest was said about the Devil after about 1800, the notion of theological evil evaporates from the book. Henceforth, evil for Delbanco—if not for most Americans—is a social, economic, political, or

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psychological phenomenon. Here he undertakes to analyze various American cultural conflicts in which one faction or another accused its enemies of being "the Devil incarnate" (even though few believed in the Devil any longer). His intent is to show the malignity of a mind-set that "demonizes" other people because they think or act differently. This rehearsal of "problems" produces a form of self-excoriation now *de rigueur* amongst the politically correct on the Left.

After 1800, in what social problems could "Satan" now be found? The litany will seem familiar: the oppression of blacks under slavery and racism, the extirpation of peace-loving American Indians, mindless prejudice against immigrant foreigners (especially the Jews), the rise of soulless corporations indifferent to the worker, the pollution of the ocean by industrial criminals, the use of the atom bomb against the defeated Japanese, the McCarthyist oppression of political idealists, the ongoing mistreatment of innocent women, the public indifference to homosexuals with AIDS, etc. Shorter or longer units of the book are devoted to potted treatments of each of these complex social issues, but they are brought up and dropped with such rapidity that all moral complexity is lost and, unwittingly, Delbanco reduces them to black-and-white moral issues.

Why does Delbanco so oversimplify these cultural phenomena? In my view he does so in order to condemn the surviving Christian religious belief in an exterior Satan and to establish his *bona fides* as politically correct, liberal in every respect, and indubitably devoted to the side of "virtue." Delbanco needs to establish these credentials because secular intellectuals are not going to like what he has to say at the end of his book. And what he has to say is that the triumph of secular rationalism has been a disaster for modern American culture.

In this he is quite right. With the loss of a belief in Satan, belief in God disappeared; and with the loss of belief in the reality of evil, good itself has dissolved into mere ideological self-interest. Everything is now permitted, we are told by those who have shaped contemporary American culture. And who has shaped it? They are the secular intellectuals and "ironists" who think that freedom is the only permissible value in life. They hold that a belief in anything positive is not merely impossible but savagely to be attacked as a form of reactionary susperstition or repressive intolerance. Without the capacity to believe in anything, these ironists have freed themselves from any moral constraint, as Kierkegaard predicted, and are ready to subvert any positive social or moral principle as repressive. The downside, for society, is that secular rationalism has now made it impossible for Americans to make any discriminations of value.

Conservatives, of course, have been saying for a long time that the secular intellectuals' attack on organized religion was subverting society's moral foundations. For conservatives the acknowledgment of the reality of sin, corruption, and human evil is preliminary to any kind of moral or social reform. Without it, there can be no religious transcendence. Kierkegaard's critique of the ironic intellectual temper made many of these points long ago. But it is interesting to hear a secular liberal concede that rationalism has produced the American moral wasteland in which we are all mired.

Many of Delbanco's points are also identical with those made by Walker Percy in novels like *The Last Gentleman*, *Lancelot*, and *The Thanatos Syndrome*. Percy was of course much influenced by Kierkegaard, as well as by other existentialists like Karl Jaspers and Gabriel Marcel. He is quoted at length by Delbanco so as to diagnose the cultural and moral ills that we all feel so keenly. But Delbanco does not share in Kierkegaard's or Percy's Christian faith, so the juxtapositions are merely poignant. Like Gertrude Himmelfarb in *The De-moralization of Society*, Delbanco rightly diagnoses our cultural dilemma as a loss of the sense of good and evil and the attendant collapse of values. But as a member of the secular

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rationalist culture he here indicts, Delbanco, like Professor Himmelfarb, can offer no foundation on which the moral reorientation of the culture could be based. For both of them, it would seem, traditional religion is a good thing for society, though "other people" should practice it. But evil, in the long run, is not an intellectual problem; nor can a historicizing scholarship find a means of exorcising it. In this connection Baudelaire was right: the Devil's cleverest ruse has been to convince us that he really does not exist.

For Delbanco matters can be somewhat repaired if we stop projecting the satanic onto the people who differ from us. Evil must be named and acknowledged, but sin must be first recognized in the self. The idea of the Devil cannot be "used for the purpose of construing the other as a monster." What sin comes down to for him is "a failure of knowledge—a lack, an obtuseness, a poverty of imagination." Hereafter, in Delbanco's view, evil must always be seen in Augustinian terms, as a lack, an imperfection, a void or nothingness, as a manifestation of "our own deficient love, our potential for envy and rancor toward creation." In this, at least, he strikes me as eminently right. But that will not stop those with a passionate grievance from continuing to demonize the supposed external source of it.

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Letters

Andrew Ross

To the Editors:

I can't even begin to tell you how much I enjoyed your reflections with respect to the "Professor of Hip," Andrew Ross. Of course, I read the *New York* magazine article on Mr. Ross; I reveled in your coverage of the ever-scandalous MLA gathering in which Mr. Ross figured (February 1995) and am tickled by your latest installment in Notes & Comments (November 1995).

Why such an interest on my part? In the fall of 1990, as an English major at Princeton, I made a horribly uninformed decision; I signed up for Mr. Ross's then hyper-popular course, dubiously entitled "Contemporary Culture: Postmodern Theory and Practice." As a product of the wayward academy, I was neither apprehensive nor suspicious. I didn't even know the culture wars existed, and why would I?

However, if you are able to withstand one of Andrew Ross's lectures, replete with all the postmodern jargon, the outlandish extrapolations, the non-sensical analogies, and the glorification of "pop icons," then you can't help but feel that something has gone terribly awry in academe. Mr. Ross opened my eyes to the culture wars. I was studying with the enemy!

Imagine my horror when I entered the classroom one day only to find one of Robert Mapplethorpe's most explicit offerings on the large screen at the front of the hall. How was this to contribute to my degree in English? Then there was the lecture devoted to the likes of Grace Jones and Madonna, both of whom were hailed as self-transforming, gender-bending pop divas. (I believe this was also the lecture in which Mr. Ross used the expression "cyber-fuck.") And I couldn't make heads or tails of the selected reading in the course packet, but then again, antinomian theorists like Foucault, Derrida, and Lacan have never meant much to me. And to add insult to injury, upon having a paper returned to me by one of Mr. Ross's postmodern graduate flunkies, I was berated for my use of "gender-specific" pronouns.

You have Mr. Ross's number, and you have accurately assessed his brand of "driveling neo-Marxist pabulum." So for future battles in the midst of the ongoing wars, I thought you might enjoy these brief, yet revealing, glimpses into Mr. Ross's lecture hall.

Andrew P. Madden
San Francisco, Calif.

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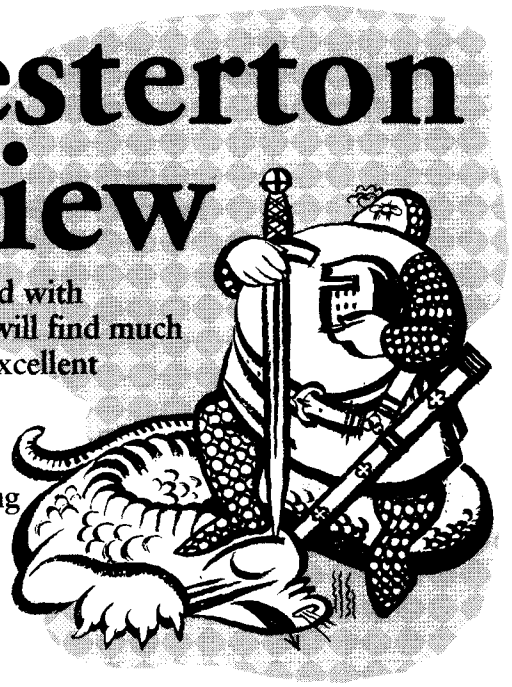

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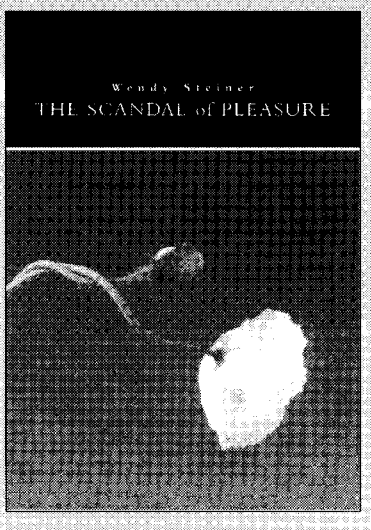

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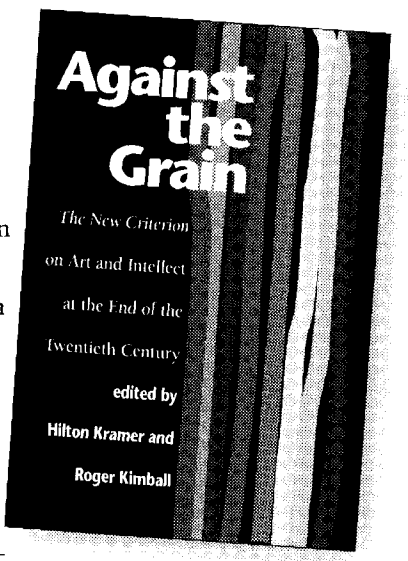

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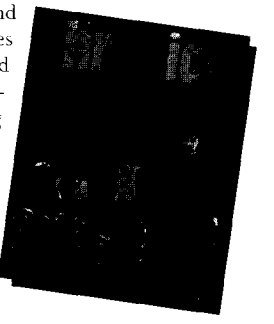

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